

cineACTION

ISSUE 88 2012

Beyond the Narrative



**Crucifixion Films
Early Cronenberg
Bruce LaBruce
Realist Spy Films
Sofia Film Festival
Wadji Mouawad**

\$8 CDN / US





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BEYOND THE NARRATIVE

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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

CINEACTION ISSUE 89

3D, IMAX, CGI AND BEYOND...

Waves of technological investments and innovations continue to transform cinema, on both miniature and 7-story screens. From novelty to ubiquity, 3D, IMAX and CGI, and the digitalization of all the arts and media, are everywhere in, and at, the movies. Just as relentlessly, cinema's place in vast global conglomerates or in the proliferating cross-platforms of new media, changes what we all, as critics and spectators, see, experience and enjoy. Open to a wide range of submissions: critical and historical discussion of transformations in cinema, analysis of representative films or directors, from Cameron to Herzog, changes in aesthetics and business.

CANADIAN FILMS AND TELEVISION

Historical and critical analysis of Canadian films and television. Reviews of recent films particularly welcome.

Papers submitted in hard copy to Scott Forsyth, Department of Film, Centre for Film and Theatre, York University, 4700 Keele St. Toronto ON, Canada M3J 1P3. If accepted, a file of the paper will be requested. Queries to sforsyth@yorku.ca. Style guide is available at www.cineaction.ca.

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CINEACTION ISSUE 90

AUTHORSHIP

Our issue explores authorship in terms of the director's contribution to a film within the context of the collaborative process that defines filmmaking practice.

Authorship remains a relevant approach to film study. We welcome submissions dealing with the concept of authorship in both the classical and contemporary cinema.

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz fjacob@yorku.ca and Richard Lippe rlippe@yorku.ca Please email any questions or interest to the editors. Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editors at 40 Alexander Street, #705, Toronto Ontario, Canada M4Y 1B5. A style guide is available on our website www.cineaction.ca

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: JAN. 15, 2013

FRONT COVER IMAGE: *L'affaire Farewell*

BACK COVER IMAGE: *The Lives of Others*

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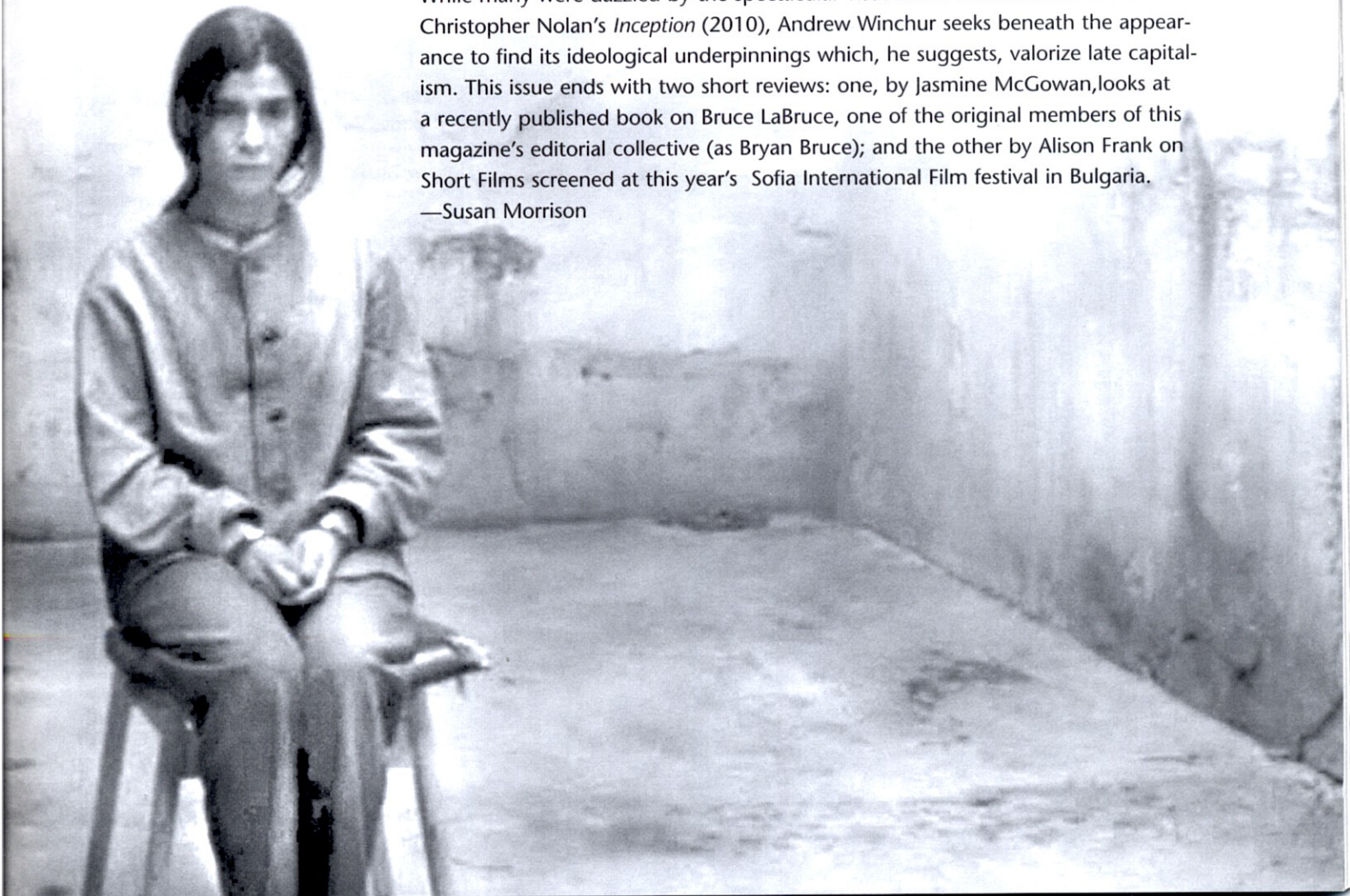
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BEYOND THE NARRATIVE

The papers in this issue of CineAction cover a wide range of themes and approaches, but what ties them together is that they all look beyond the filmic narrative; it's not the plot that counts here, but the various meanings, ideas and connections that can be teased out of films when an analytic is applied. Two of the papers deal with a fresh look at specific genres: "Love in the Time of Calvary" is Brian Walter's reading of crucifixion films from the unusual viewpoint of male-female relationships; Luis Garcia-Mainar investigates the Spy genre by separating out a sub-genre, the 'Realist' Spy film, which includes, along with the action, an emphasis on the impact of the professional spy's choice on their personal life. Two other papers focus on the horror genre as filtered through the singular vision of David Cronenberg at the beginning stages of his film career. Michael Pepe offers up an analysis of *Scanners* (1981) as a 'baby-boomer psychodrama' in "Lefties and Hippies and Yuppies, Oh My!". Allan MacInnis's piece offers a close study of three of Cronenberg's earliest films, *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977) and *The Brood* (1979), by opening up Robin Wood's sometimes scathing critiques of Cronenberg's work to see what can be said to hold true today. Robin's writings are invoked again in the piece by Amir Khan on *Winnebago Man* (2009), in order to consider the merits of documentary as both art and critique. May Telmissany's paper on the films of the Lebanese-born Canadian playwright and filmmaker Wajdi Mouawad and Jill Glessing's review of Allan Sekula and Noel Burch's *The Forgotten Space* (2010) look at ways in which these very different films explore and expose very serious social and political issues at both the macro and micro levels. While many were dazzled by the spectacular visuals and technical marvels of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), Andrew Winchur seeks beneath the appearance to find its ideological underpinnings which, he suggests, valorize late capitalism. This issue ends with two short reviews: one, by Jasmine McGowan, looks at a recently published book on Bruce LaBruce, one of the original members of this magazine's editorial collective (as Bryan Bruce); and the other by Alison Frank on Short Films screened at this year's Sofia International Film festival in Bulgaria.

—Susan Morrison



Love in the Time of Calvary

ROMANCE AND FAMILY VALUES IN CRUCIFIXION FILMS

By BRIAN WALTER

While marketing his 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson pointedly shared anecdotes about the Muslims and agnostics among his film crew who converted to Christianity during the filming. Previewing his already controversial film for conservative Christian leaders across America before its official Ash Wednesday release, Gibson essentially offered it up as a weapon that they could use in the 'red state/blue state' culture wars to win converts to Christ. These anecdotes constituted just one element of Gibson's clever "guerilla marketing" campaign,¹ which rather remarkably helped what might otherwise have remained little more than an art-house curiosity—with its remote historical and geographical setting, no stars, and

English subtitles to translate the two dead languages used for dialogue—earn more than \$600 million at the box office and qualify as an improbable blockbuster.²

Or so it could easily seem. When considered within the longer history of Hollywood's treatments of Biblical material, the success not only seems much less improbable, but actually almost predictable. At least since D. W. Griffith and the early days of feature films, filmmakers had regularly looked to well-known literature for story material in general and to Biblical stories in particular as conveniently pious vehicles for the revealing costumes, grandiloquent dialogue, and massive crowd pageantry so indispensable to the genre.³ If Cecil B.

The Passion of the Christ



DeMille is most famous today for establishing Charlton Heston as a WASP icon by casting him as Moses and having him intone the voice of God in his extravagant 1956 Technicolor version of *The Ten Commandments*,⁴ it helps to recall that DeMille began mounting his spectacular visions of the Bible several decades earlier, in the silent era, following Griffith's example in *Intolerance* with a 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments* and then, a few years later, conjuring a frankly Salomesque version of Mary Magdalene for Jesus to convert in 1927's *King of Kings*. Its venerability may spark debate, but the Biblical epic certainly boasts a long history, suggesting its enduring appeal for American audiences.

The mid-century renaissance of Hollywood's "swords and sandals" epics shows how well the genre could adapt both to industry anxieties and to America's popular self-image. After losing control over the exhibition of its product and finding itself on the losing end of demographic shifts that saw fewer and fewer Americans going to the movies as their primary source of entertainment, Hollywood resorted increasingly to costly color and widescreen technologies in an effort to maintain its profits, emphasizing the technical superiority of the theatrical film experience over the increasingly ubiquitous home television.⁵ The Biblical epic lent itself superbly to the "big event pictures" that Hollywood produced to keep audiences coming to theatres,⁶ and not only because of the visual splendors available in depicting the glory that was imperial Rome or the majesty of pharaonic Egypt. The genre similarly supported the melodrama of erotic love striving for mastery with family identity or, still more, with spiritual duty. Heston's Moses is a prince of Egypt who spurns the powerful princess Nefretiri first to save the otherwise helpless slaves and then to marry a humble shepherd woman from the countryside whom he later also abandons (in effect), the better to fulfill his divinely-ordained mission by leading the Hebrews out of bondage and to the Promised Land. So, in addition to championing American ideals of freedom in the face of oppression, DeMille's *Ten Commandments* catered to conservative white America's image of itself as a piously disciplined and wholesome alternative to the corruptions of urban life and inherited power, precisely at a time when white middle-class Americans were increasingly abandoning urban centers for the suburbs.⁷

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* does not fall simply and easily into an unbroken line of Hollywood Biblical epics such as *The Ten Commandments*, but it does mine a vein of conservative Christian separatism that Hollywood had sought to tap going back at least to the 1930 establishment of the Motion Picture Production Code, which represented an "attempt to bind movies to Judeo-Christian morality."⁸ Gibson's entry retains and/or reproduces several core characteristics of the genre, particularly the rules that require love plots entangled with the Christ story to emphasize a conflict between selfish earthly desires and grandly selfless acceptance of higher callings. The women—including, on occasion, even the Virgin Mary—in these story lines tempt men to reject spiritual or otherwise higher imperatives. The specific circumstances and even the results differ, but the age-old association of femaleness with the lower, bodily faculties and maleness with higher, intellectual, spiritual motives prevails, in some form, across the decades in these films.

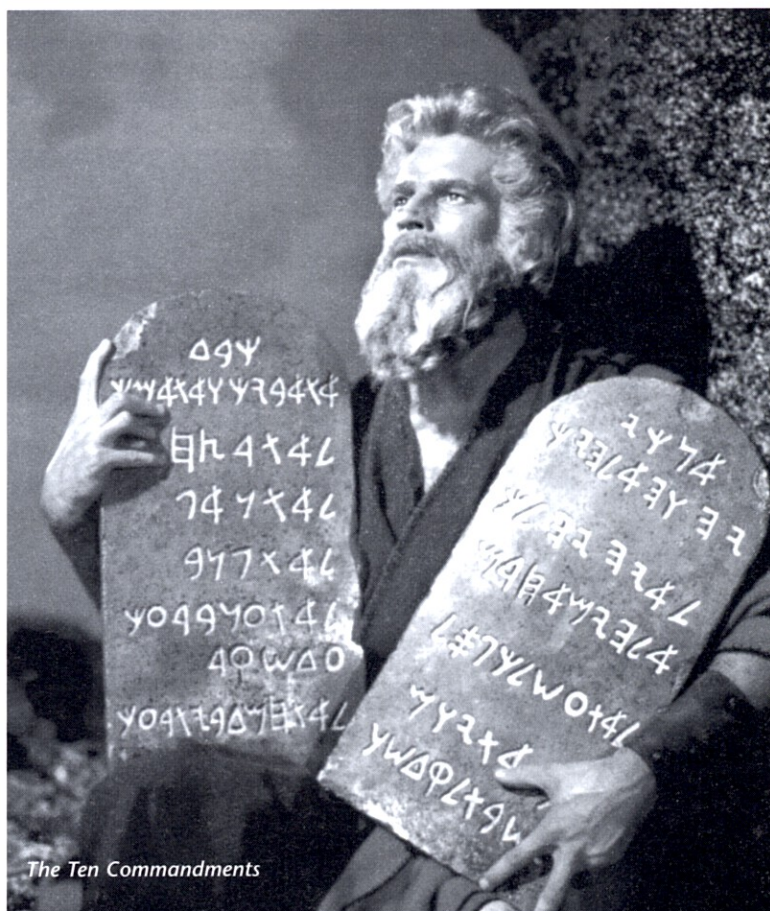
To connect Gibson's notoriously brutal scenario to the long history of Biblical epics, it is useful to compare its treatment of love plots to similar subplots in two earlier Crucifixion films, *The Robe* (1953) and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of*



The Ten Commandments



The Ten Commandments



The Ten Commandments

Christ (1988). In *The Robe*, the oldest and most generically conventional of these films, Diana, the female lead, finally joins her male counterpart, Tribune Marcellus Gallio, in defying the young new emperor Caligula and embracing a beatified martyrdom; though she strives earnestly to lure Gallio away from his staunch religious commitment—offering the joys of marriage and domestic life as an alternative—Diana finally and heroically gives up this dream for her own conversion, wedding political independence to spiritual apotheosis in a way that seems surprisingly progressive in comparison to the later films. Just as surprisingly, though from a different angle, it is *The Last Temptation of Christ*—the object of a remarkably potent and successful right-wing Christian protest—that proves perhaps the most philosophically conservative of the three, forcing Jesus simply and consistently to reject the women who love him to become the Messiah, embracing his identity as the son of God only by dismissing the flesh and the women who so temptingly embody it for him. Finally, in *The Passion of the Christ*, the quasi-allegorical relationship between Pontius Pilate and his unhappy wife, Claudia, serves to confirm comfortable truisms about the conflict between love and moral duty needing to resolve itself decisively (however painfully) in favor of the latter.

The oldest of these films, *The Robe*, was made as an event film from top to bottom, but it also bears clear marks of Hollywood's self-doubts in the early Cold War era. The first film presented in the new CinemaScope aspect ratio, *The Robe* also boasted glorious Technicolor processing and stereophonic sound at a time when Hollywood was already (according to conventional wisdom) losing much of its viewership to the popular new home television set. But beyond its technological advances, *The Robe* betrays Hollywood's political anxieties in the 1950s, finding in the story of a dissolute Roman tribune's conversion to Christianity what would seem to be a rather unlikely paean to the heroic, solitary champion of democratic freedoms rebelling against the suffocating forces of inherited and centralized power. Tribune Marcellus Gallio finds himself in the film's second act in Palestine commanding the Roman soldiers who crucify Christ and barter his fateful robe at the foot of

the cross in the midst of a gathering storm. Driven mad by his contact with the robe, Marcellus only finds relief when he converts to Christianity, returning to Rome in the film's final act to antagonize and finally reject the authority of the spoiled, whiny, sexually suspect Caligula, who, as emperor, sentences Marcellus to execution at the very end of the movie. Debuting in 1953, a few years before its more famous Biblical epic counterpart, *The Ten Commandments*, *The Robe* anticipates the later film's improbable treatment of the Old Testament Exodus as a story of heroically devout rebels taking a stand for liberty and democratic freedoms by ascribing egalitarian virtues to a scion of the Roman empire who bravely turns against the privilege of his upbringing.⁹

The Robe also shares with *The Ten Commandments* the figure of the female outsider who falls in love with the eventual man of God before his conversion and who later finds herself spurned for the sake of his higher, divine calling. From her debut in the Roman marketplace, Diana is both Roman subject and critic, an outsider whose dress, movements, and placement within the public space offer Marcellus an alternative to the decadence and cynicism that otherwise prevails. The film opens with a montage sequence of pagan statues and marching soldiers that takes full advantage of the elongated CinemaScope frame to overwhelm viewers with the simultaneous glory and corruption of imperial Rome. The montage sequence ends with Marcellus's debut, wandering through the market, perusing slaves for possible purchase. Diana eventually appears behind him, and the busy mise-en-scène of the flesh market around Marcellus immediately gives way to calm and clarity around this woman who remains on the margins. The cross-cutting in the conversation that ensues and the camera placement of the subsequent auction scene between Marcellus and Caligula (not yet emperor) continue to emphasize Diana's alienation from the sordid business of the place.

Subsequent scenes work to establish a subtly mixed status for Diana: both a loyal Roman subject and an independent spirit devoted to Marcellus even in his eventual madness. She combines these two seemingly incompatible traits perhaps most markedly in the scene when Marcellus returns from Palestine

The Robe





The Robe

(his grip on sanity already loosening) and she presents him to the old emperor. Displacing the classical architecture, colorful robes, and stately dialogue into the remote countryside, far from the political bodies and flesh peddlers of Rome, this sequence offers the best of both worlds to contemporary conservative Christian viewers, shunning the corruption of the city for the idyllic retreat of a rural life which nevertheless supports civilized, even decorous behavior. Diana is at her best in this setting, reconciling her duties as a Roman subject to the emperor (who, like his wife, would prefer to see her marry their son, Caligula) with her ardent faithfulness to a rebellious tribune. Diana waits for Marcellus on a stone bench overlooking a cliff that drops away to the sea, a bracing setting for Marcellus's return and the fateful incorporation of the life-changing experience he has had in Palestine into the progress of their love. In her previous two scenes, both set in Rome, Diana appeared in wraps and head-coverings, protected not so much against the weather as from the dangers of imperial decadence, but here, with the striking stonework of a Roman house crowning the hill behind, she appears openly in an off-the-shoulder yellow gown, arm-band, and head-dress, a noblewoman of the empire free to the elements. Here in this outpost, Marcellus releases Diana from her commitment to him—a freedom she pointedly does not accept, instead rushing to take his hand as he heads back to the house to report to the emperor. She serves, in fact, as his go-between, risking the emperor's wrath to spare Marcellus from exposing his addled state (caused by his contact with Christ's robe). And when the emperor follows Marcellus's example at the end of their interview by freeing her from her promise to the beleaguered tribune, Diana refuses once again, a prelude to her final rejection of Caligula at the end of the movie when she elects to join Marcellus in martyrdom. In the midst of his madness—the first step toward his conversion and beatification—Marcellus can no longer fulfill his duties as subject of the empire unless Diana runs interference for him. She puts herself at risk to rescue his interview with the emperor, who thinks she deserves more: "What a wife you would make for an emperor," he says, shaking his head over her devotion to Marcellus. She chooses long-time, innocent love over power, letting her man leave to heal himself before returning to her. In her brave faith-

fulness, standing by her almost helpless man, Diana somehow confirms the timelessness of middle-class American family values.

But she is still a woman in love, of course. Though she lets him leave to seek healing away from her, Diana will not simply cede Marcellus to his new religion, championing their love over his devotion to his new god when he finally returns to Rome as a staunch Christian convert. The crucial element in this version of the old enmity between love and spiritual duty is Diana's ability and willingness to reconcile these usually implacable antagonists, the *misè-en-scène* combining with the dialogue to affirm his conversion by incorporating it into their relationship, sanctifying their love and prefiguring their joint martyrdom. Though she has not even heard from him in a year, Diana settles for a chaste hug when Marcellus finally appears among his fellow converts in their hiding place in the catacombs beneath the city, accepting a prolonged lover's kiss only once they have withdrawn into an inner chamber where they are alone. When Marcellus kneels before her, head bowed, clasping her hands in a suppliant's position, Diana initially dismisses his religion as a fantasy: "What you told me was a beautiful story, but it just isn't true. Justice and charity—men will never accept such a philosophy. The world isn't like that. It never has been and it never will be." But when Marcellus responds by confirming his conversion and determination to save Demetrius, the former slave who has helped convert him ("I owe him a great deal more than my life"), Diana in her turn offers the still more crucial response; pulling back to bow her own head and touch her forehead to his, Diana submits her desires to his devotion: "If your god means that much to you, I won't stand in your way. I want to be your wife, whatever you believe. I'd marry you if I had to share you with a thousand gods." Immediately upon this declaration, a servant enters the hitherto private chamber to announce that everything is ready for Marcellus to lead his fellow Christians into the emperor's dungeons and free Demetrius (their 'brother'). Diana's righteous (if reluctant) acceptance of Marcellus's higher call is the last piece to fall into place for the act of spiritual heroism that is to follow. Marcellus entrusts the fateful robe to her as he leaves, implying that this already self-sacrificing woman is now as responsible for the faith's future in Rome as he is.



The Last Temptation of Christ

The last time Diana and Marcellus appear alone together—Marcellus in prison on the eve of his trial—the choice between love and spiritual call is still more urgent. Diana begs Marcellus not to defy Caligula and go thereby to certain death, even arguing that his god does not want him to die. She adds that she wants to believe and live without fear, but that she cannot do so without him, for the moment setting her love for him above his faith. She exits on that plea, leaving the camera to linger on Marcellus frozen in place, having to decide (apparently) between his devotion to Jesus and his love for Diana. The pay-off, of course, comes in the climactic trial scene, when she requests the robe from Marcellus after Caligula recoils from it. Diana then follows Marcellus's example by refusing the new emperor a final time and willingly joining Marcellus in martyrdom. As the two walk hand-in-hand out of the palace through the colorfully-costumed masses, the image dissolves to show them still walking, but now amid a blue sky, beatified in their joint sacrifice.

Diana thus finally serves to complete and even certify the nobility of Marcellus's choice at the same time that she demonstrates her own spiritual attunement and capacity, an unusual affirmation of the ability of femaleness to respond appropriately and meaningfully to spiritual imperative and even to supply means that their male counterparts lack. Nevertheless, Diana's choices confirm the larger incompatibility of the flesh and the spirit central to this genre; they can unite only in death.

Three-and-a-half decades later, conservative Christians fought successfully to keep a film out of theaters for its purportedly radical image of Jesus.¹⁰ Well before Universal Pictures officially released Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* in August of 1988, the film had sparked widespread resistance and helped to galvanize a union between right-wing political groups and conservative Christians that had periodically been assailing Hollywood as a den of iniquity going back to the pre-

Code era. Some protesters of *The Last Temptation* repeated old, ugly charges laid at Hollywood's feet in the 1930s, that the studios were run by Jews unfriendly to middle America's Christian sensibilities, God-denying flesh-peddlers who merely capitalized on the wayward public's lustful impulses.¹¹ Although it appeared a few years before Dan Quayle famously delivered his 'family values' speech,¹² Scorsese's film clearly piqued the champions of patriarchal, literalist brands of Christianity that placed the father at the godhead of the nuclear family household with the wife and children serving to confirm his authority.¹³

In the context of the Reagan-Bush era's 'family values' agenda, the sins that Scorsese's film committed are unmistakable: he allowed Jesus to appear more as a man of fallible, tempted flesh than as an icon of sacramental blood and spaniel-eyed platitudes, along the way treating the canonical story so frankly that it earned the first R-rating ever for a film about Jesus.¹⁴ Following Kazantzakis's emphasis on the battle between flesh and spirit, Scorsese shows Jesus agonizing over the divine call, even constructing crosses for the Romans' crucifixion of Jews in his desperation to make God leave him alone. Jesus also appears wholly naked during the scourging and on the cross, his genitals (such a source of interest in their infant form for medieval painters) unprotected by the traditional loincloth. But it is the dream sequence near the end of the film which delivers the crowning insults. Jesus appears naked again, finally having sex with his beloved Mary Magdalene in a shadowy honeymoon hut, just the prelude, as it turns out, to a hypothetical scenario in which the son of God begets (after Mary Magdalene's death) children upon both Mary and her sister Martha, a happy and remarkably fruitful bigamist. Although the rumors that circulated about the licentiousness of the film's Jesus seem seldom to have understood or known the details of his characterization, the rumor of so tangibly available and frankly sensual a savior were more than enough to rouse con-



The Last Temptation of Christ

certed and highly successful protests.¹⁵

The irony of this conservative resistance is that Scorsese's characterization of Jesus celebrates middle-class family life and (more disturbingly) serves up a frankly misogynistic portrayal of women and femaleness as an unending temptation that men must ultimately reject to get closer to God. Any conventionally simplified reading of Eve as the corrupter of Adam will find ample confirmation in Scorsese's film, where Mary Magdalene appears first in a fetishized close-up of her racily decorated feet and later seeks to seduce him away from his quest to find God in the desert. Later, during Jesus's desert sojourn, the serpent appears outside Jesus's circle and speaks with Mary Magdalene's voice, trying to tempt the reluctant savior by promising that he can be transported instantly to bed with her. And the last temptation that Jesus faces is offered by Satan in the guise of a curly blond-haired girl who claims to be his guardian angel, tempting him down from the cross by offering him the possibility of wedded bliss with Mary Magdalene, and then helping him replace his first dead wife with not one but two women who give him many children; this Jesus, it would seem, amply honors the Old Testament charge to go forth and multiply. When Jesus initially hesitates to accept the embraces of his sister-in-law Mary, his guardian demon-angel repeats a line she has already used to help him accept his marriage to Mary Magdalene: "There is only one woman in the world, with a thousand faces." It finally takes an angry, aged Judas to pull Jesus away from his various corrupting Eves and back onto the straight and narrow, limping to his death bed to denounce Jesus's abdication of divine responsibility: "What are you doing here? What business do you have here with women, with children? What's good for a man isn't good for God." If it weren't for the violence and the sex that earned the film its R-rating, *The Last Temptation* could easily adapt to the most conservatively patriarchal Christian dogmas.

An early sequence of scenes involving Jesus and Mary Magdalene emphasizes the threat that earthly love poses to the divine imperative in *The Last Temptation*. After the opening crucifixion scene, Jesus prepares to head out into the wilderness to make peace with the agonizing calls he feels, which leave him writhing in the dust in pain. But he does not get far before he realizes that he first has to make peace with his former childhood love, Magdalene,¹⁶ detouring to the busy marketplace of Magdala where men of various ethnicities line up for her services in what would become known as the "brothel scene."¹⁷ In Kazantzakis's novel, Jesus remains outside the brothel waiting for his chance to speak with Magdalene, but Scorsese puts him inside where he will not only see her having sex with a remarkably numerous crowd of customers, but even decline his turn when one of them gestures to him. When he is finally alone with Magdalene, who still lies naked on the bed, Jesus approaches slowly, asking her forgiveness for making her hate God. In the subsequent exchanges between the two, first at bedside, then outside under the stars, Magdalene both tempts and taunts Jesus, exposing her breasts to him on the bed, asking him to take her body, placing his hand between her legs, and finally—when it is clear that she cannot seduce him—inviting him to stay the night with her before he resumes his spiritual quest, adding that he will "still be a virgin for the desert." She sets her desire for him against his determination to end his spiritual torment by finding God—and she loses, the film thus affirming the conventional incompatibility of love with spiritual duty.

What makes this conventional treatment surprising is the film's clear (and often successful) efforts to revolutionize and modernize crucial aspects of Jesus's and his followers' story. It would be possible, for example, to argue that Magdalene's love for Jesus informs his moral ascension and that, moreover, she herself gives over her love to become one of his two disciples who best accept the sacrifice he has to make. Barbara Hershey,

the actress who played Mary Magdalene, has praised Scorsese for allowing her character to appear with the disciples during Jesus's ministry and even at the Last Supper, from which the Magdalene traditionally is absent.¹⁸ And in the final triumph, when Jesus returns to the cross to proclaim his life and earthly ministry finished, the reaction shot of the Magdalene confirms not only his sacrifice, but her acceptance of her own. In these and other details, Mary Magdalene certainly assumes dimensions that she traditionally has not had in most Hollywood characterizations, informing and underscoring the ascendancy of Jesus's decisions in much the way that the film's Judas serves as Jesus's partner, even as Christ's conscience, the special disciple whom Jesus seeks out for late-night discussion of the meaning of his ministry and life. Mary Magdalene, like Judas, enjoys a special relationship with Jesus, a crucial source of support on his way to the cross.

But even in this revisionist pairing with Judas, Mary Magdalene galvanizes the association of femaleness with the body, which ultimately (as always) has to bow to the mind and spirit in the man of God. When Judas appears in the last temptation reverie, he hobbles up toward the old, dying Jesus prostrate on his mat to abjure the erstwhile Savior's choice, showing no tenderness toward or even interest in the failing body of his beloved friend, Jesus's embodied conscience arrived to lash him for moral cowardice one final time. Judas's behavior and responsibility in the temptation contrast sharply with those of his female counterpart earlier in the reverie, when she withdraws into the honeymoon hut and holds her new husband in her lap while tending to his wounds and cleansing his body of blood as a prelude to their lovemaking. Even in the reverie, Magdalene focuses on Jesus's body, leaving his mind and spirit to Judas. The love of a woman in *The Last Temptation* may be beautiful and even essential, but it remains an obstacle to or, at best, a marker Jesus passes on his way toward exaltation.

The remarkable success that conservative Christians had in debarring Scorsese's film from wide release in 1988 ironically anticipated the remarkable success some sixteen years later of Mel Gibson's savage vision of the last twelve hours of Christ's life. If WASP-ish America had long distrusted Hollywood, here, finally, was a movie that would put the dream factory's resources to compelling use in the service of a conservative Christian agenda. The success of this famously brutal film suggests the depth of its patrons' sense of victimization, their alienation from "mainstream culture". Gibson holds the body of Jesus up for a different kind of erotic spectacle, a test of physical endurance to leave the audience cheering at the end for resolve above and beyond the call of any but the highest duty. In the infamous scourging scene, Jesus takes the best flogging the Roman soldiers have to offer and then rises to his feet again in a display of outrageously macho humility, ready for a second round of fantastically prolonged flagellation.

But if Gibson's film breaks decisively from tradition by making Jesus's triumph almost entirely physical, surviving an ordeal that no human body could plausibly endure, it too propagates staple precepts of the genre about the incompatibility of earthly or human love with a higher call. In this case, the old antinomy prevails particularly in the characterization of Pontius Pilate and his wife, Claudia. Gibson's Pilate is a calm and fundamentally humane politician who manages not to sentence Jesus to the cross directly, instead finally giving in to the high priest's and the restless mob's call for crucifixion only in hopes of avoiding an uprising and much more widespread bloodshed. Most

importantly, in turning Jesus over for crucifixion, Pilate goes against the strenuous wishes of his wife, Claudia, whom he asks, "Do you see the truth?", and who replies affirmatively: she knows it is wrong to have this Galilean crucified. Once again, then, the male authority figure has to choose between a woman's wishes and what he sees as the morally right (or the least morally objectionable) choice. Pilate has to send Jesus off to Golgotha, of course, so the imperative he is following is actually God's, as Jesus reminds him at a moment when Pilate, still lost, is groping for a way out of his impossible situation. The upshot of this irresolvable disagreement between the visionary wife and the reluctantly politic husband who defies her wishes is to make the rabble who insist on Jesus's execution all the more ugly and insufferable. Love complicates and even opposes duty, but duty will out.

Pilate's and Claudia's debut scene subtly establishes the dependable antagonism between (feminized) love and higher duty. The scene establishes a mystical but unmistakably eroticized connection between the consul's wife and the soon-to-be-crucified savior, a rather unlikely attachment that may seem displaced in the way it targets her husband, but which becomes all the more earnest and potent for doing so. This scene and the subsequent ones featuring Claudia perpetuate an image of inarticulate female spirituality blending indissolubly with erotic response and desire, the woman in this case recognizing and finding herself drawn to the authentic Man of God instinctively but uselessly, incapable of acting upon or even fully expressing the truth she clings doggedly to—that her husband should not condemn 'the Galilean'.

The scene begins with a cut from the Virgin Mother watching her son being escorted to the temple in chains to a full shot of Pilate in his strikingly lit bedchamber, examining a scroll by candle light amid the shadowy columns and gauzy curtains. Distracted by a soft sound from within, the thoughtful husband puts down the scroll (the emblem of official business) to investigate, the source of the sound remaining unseen as he pushes deeper inside the curtains, bathed in blue and the soft orange glow of the lantern light. A low-angle medium shot of Pilate pushing aside the last curtain (but not bodily violating the apparently sacred space where his wife sleeps) cuts to a deeply-shadowed point-of-view shot that illuminates only what appears to be coverings at the edge of a bed in the lower left of the screen and a bit of the stone floor and a column in the upper right. A knock at the door startles the transfixed consul, who glances in alarm over his left shoulder, but then looks back to the shadowed space where his wife lies in troubled sleep, the soft blue lighting from the left picking up what appear to be beads of sweat on his cheek, his eyes now mostly in shadow even as the light picks out his colorful tunic. He moves smartly to the double-doors and pulls them open to reveal his commander, Abenader, prompting a sharp cut to the pay-off shot, Claudia in profile popping up in fear from screen right, the light catching just the edge of her upturned face, mouth open and gasping, in the golden light of a frame otherwise completely dark—a starkly erotic image of a shaken woman pulled into urgent wakefulness.

For Pilate, the news that Abenader delivers of trouble among the natives is a practical problem, one that had better be truly important to justify the late-night intrusion, but for Claudia, it is something much more momentous, even terrifying. Gibson shoots the exchange between Pilate and Abenader from relatively conventional crosscut, over-the-shoulder perspectives,

but the initial framing on Pilate's face leaves room in the left portion of the frame to show, even in shallow focus, Claudia sitting up in bed to listen to the report, the lamplight softly framing her hair amid the blue and orange-tinged shadows and then rising to approach the door when Abenader mentions the high priest's having arrested some prophet. Arriving at the door, she moves past her consul husband to question the soldier for her own purposes: "A Galilean? Who are you talking about?" Pilate disappears from the frame when Claudia moves in, subtly but decisively superseding his authority, the fact that she is wearing a nightgown with her hair down in front of a soldier apparently is of no concern to her (or her husband) in the midst of this mysterious crisis which has touched her so keenly. With her question, the camera cuts back to Jesus in the temple, getting ready to face the high priest, the cut's timing lending Claudia's investment in the arrest of the Galilean greater authority than even Pilate's. The whole scene is remarkably sensual, intimate, and urgent, at first glance a radical departure from traditional depictions of Pilate as a coward or a hypocrite who washes his hands of Jesus's killing but does not lift one to actually stop it.

But if Gibson's portrait of an unhappily pragmatic statesman who is also a sensitive, brooding husband effectively humanizes the stock figure of Pilate, his relationship with his clear-minded, horrified wife nevertheless re-inscribes femaleness as the stuff of the inarticulate lower faculties, maleness as the seat of higher, intellectual forces that finally have to govern the lower ones for causes that they cannot comprehend, much less appreciate. When she appears next, she is dressed and made up to play the part of a consul's wife, walking by his side in a loose framing down the torch-lit corridors and urging her husband not to 'condemn this Galilean' because 'he's holy' and his conviction will 'only bring trouble' to Pilate. But the woman's suit goes nowhere, Pilate overruling her with political considerations that apparently have not occurred to her: "Do you know what I consider trouble, Claudia? This stinking outpost, that filthy rabble out there." He exits the frame as she and the camera come to a stop, her face still anguished, possessed of a simple but powerless truth, helpless before the march of events that her husband must see to their end. The image of the pained woman trying hopelessly to persuade her determined, driven man from facing his destiny would fit easily and naturally in *The Robe* (substitute Diana and Marcellus) or *The Last Temptation of Christ* (substitute Jesus and either Mary Magdalene or the Virgin Mary at key moments). The dynamic is remarkably consistent: the love of women may deepen and romanticize the intellectual-spiritual commitment of the men, but it can ultimately never stand against it, finally only lending it more tragic poignancy. The woman's will is not to be done.

This comparison of Crucifixion films across the decades suggests just how strong a gravitational pull the old male-female, spirit-flesh dualities exert in cinematic treatments of this traditional story.¹⁹ The comparison also underscores the genre's enduring impulse to cater to middle-class America's idealization of the nuclear family, films succeeding or failing at least in part insofar as they allow parents to vigorously indoctrinate their children with images of heroic Christian sacrifice.²⁰ Love can happen in the time of Calvary, but only by acknowledging that the body finally is made for scourging and sacrifice as it properly and definitively cedes its very existence to an unearthly embrace with God.

Notes

- 1 *The Passion of the Christ*. Blu-Ray. Directed by Mel Gibson. Produced by Icon Distribution, Inc. 2004. The Blu-Ray "Ultimate Edition" of the film includes, among its special features, a documentary segment entitled "Guerilla Marketing", which covers various aspects of the film's marketing campaign.
- 2 James Y. Trammell, "Who Does God Want Me to Invite to See *The Passion of the Christ*? Marketing Movies to Evangelicals," *Journal of Media and Religion* 9 (2010): 19. Trammell identifies the film's ability to serve as a proselytizing device as one of four "dominant themes" in its marketing campaign, the other three being accuracy, authenticity, and justification for its R-rating (23).
- 3 John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 13. Belton describes the increasing use of classical story material as an important component of the film industry's increasing desire to cater to middle-class sensibilities.
- 4 The promotional materials for the DVD *Charlton Heston Reads the Bible* quote Heston on the importance of *The Ten Commandments* to his career and life: "Ever since playing Moses in *The Ten Commandments* I've felt a deep, personal connection with the Bible which remains as vivid and vital today as when it was told around campfires centuries before there was any written language." From Willie Osterwell's review of *Charlton Heston Reads the Bible*, <http://www.justpressplay.net/movies/dvdblu-ray-reviews/7596-charlton-heston-presents-the-bible.html#ixzz1L7GE3pby>. (Accessed May 1, 2011.)
- 5 See Belton, 321-32.
- 6 See Belton, 336-8.
- 7 See Belton, 324.
- 8 Stephen Vaughn, "Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 77, no. 1 (June, 1990): 39. Vaughn points out that the film industry made traditional arbiters of morality anxious because it spoke to "mass audiences directly . . . [and] all too easily bypassed traditional agencies of socialization—the church, the school, the family" 39.
- 9 Belton notes both the general pandering of the mid-century Biblical epic to Cold War patriotism and, ironically, the ability of *The Robe* to take a stance against McCarthy and the Red Scare. In either understanding, the genre addresses contemporary political fears and pressures in mid-century America. (See Belton, p. 313.)
- 10 For a useful breakdown of the remarkably potent and widespread protests and the decisions by various theater chains either not to screen the film at all or to limit it to select urban markets, see Thomas R. Lindlof, *Hollywood Under Siege: Martin Scorsese, the Religious Right, and the Culture Wars* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), especially the eighth chapter, "The Big Wind-Up" pp. 219-49.
- 11 For a useful account of the resistance the film sparked, see Lindlof.
- 12 Dan Quayle, "Address to the Commonwealth Club," May 19, 1992, http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/speeches_StandingFirm_CCC_3.html. (Accessed May 1, 2011.)
- 13 The list of conservative Christian leaders who fomented protest included many who had also protested abortion, feminism, and homosexuality, such as James Dobson of Focus on the Family, Jerry Falwell, and Donald Wildmon. (See Lindlof, pp. 220-1.)
- 14 The film earned the Restricted rating "primarily for scenes of frontal nudity, simulated sex, and graphic violence" Lindlof 238.
- 15 Summarizing the problem that *The Last Temptation* posed to evangelicals, Trammell invokes telling gender stereotypes, the film characterizing Jesus "less as a powerful, confident savior and more as a weak, reluctant messiah" p24. Scorsese's Jesus, in short, is not sufficiently macho for conservative American Christians—a weakness that Gibson's film would work vigorously to correct.
- 16 As Kazantzakis does in the novel, the film breaks with the long convention of referring to Mary Magdalene either by her full name or as 'the Magdalene' by shortening it to just 'Magdalene'. (See, for example, Kazantzakis, pp. 88ff.)
- 17 See Tammie Kennedy's "(Re)Presenting Mary Magdalene: A Feminist Reading of *The Last Temptation of Christ*," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. 9 (Spring, 2005), paragraph 16.
- 18 Kennedy, paragraphs 8-12.
- 19 Even Monty Python's delightfully irreverent *Life of Brian* includes a dalliance for the reluctant Brian with a brazen ideologue named Judith for which the pseudo-Messiah receives a nasty scolding from his equally pseudo-virgin mother.
- 20 One of the more telling and disturbing aspects of the marketing campaign for *The Passion*, in fact, was the pamphlets prepared by Icon Pictures to coach parents in the reasons they could and should take their young children to watch Jesus being whipped and beaten to a bloody pulp.

THE RETURN OF THE Realist Spy Film



By LUIS M. GARCIA-MAINAR

Stieg Larsson's successful *Millenium* novels (2005, 2006, 2007) have become a major phenomenon in contemporary globalized culture by combining criminal inquiry with complex accounts of personal life and realism. In doing so they increasingly rely on motifs borrowed from the tradition of the spy narrative as Lisbeth Salander finally faces her father, Zalachenko. In a similar vein, and despite its topical issue, Doug Liman's *Fair Game* (2010) tells the true story of CIA agent Valerie Plame by placing as much emphasis on her political role as on her ability to reconcile spy work with the demands of her family. In the last decade, the proliferation of these combined views of espionage, personal life and realism in such popular texts suggests their relevance to contemporary culture, and in a way that transcends the borders of, at least, Western countries. This paper discusses *The Good Shepherd* (2006), *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006) and *L'affaire Farewell* (*Farewell*, 2009), three spy films produced in three different countries, as representative of a recent tendency of the genre characterized by this return to a realism that, already a trademark of the genre, is now inflected by contemporary concerns. Although the paper's main interest will be theatrically-released films, it will also refer to television because the 1980s BBC series based on John le Carre's novels contributed significantly to establish-

ing the conventions of the realist spy narrative, and in the last decade the genre has flourished on the small screen.

The spy film genre moved through the 1970s and 1980s towards an increasing relevance of action and suspense, as proved by the films based on Frederick Forsyth's novels *The Day of the Jackal* (1973), *The Odessa File* (1974), *The Dogs of War* (1980) and *The Fourth Protocol* (1987), a tendency that would become even stronger in the 1990s and 2000s. 1990 saw the release of the first film adaptation of Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan saga, *The Hunt for Red October*, soon followed by *Patriot Games* (1992), *Clear and Present Danger* (1994) and *The Sum of All Fears* (2002). They initiated a cycle of action spy thrillers that would include the *Mission Impossible* series (1996, 2000, 2006) and, more recently, the *Bourne* films based on Robert Ludlum's novels (2002, 2004, 2007). In the 2000s the Bond franchise swayed towards action heroics with Daniel Craig, as did such films as *Spy Games* (2001) and *The Tailor of Panama* (2001). More recently, *Body of Lies* (2008), *Traitor* (2008), *Taken* (2008) and *Salt* (2010) have followed the same line.

Against this background stands out a less popular cycle of spy television series produced in the last decade. CBS's *The Agency* (2001–2003), ABC's *Threat Matrix* (2003–2004) and TNT's *The Grid* (2004) offered realism and topicality by placing



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secret agents in the new context of terrorism, but they achieved none of the success of the more fantasy-based *Alias* (ABC, 2001–2006), *24* (Fox, 2001–2010), *Burn Notice* (USA Network, 2007–present) or the miniseries *The Company* (TNT, 2007). As Wesley Britton comments, these examples prove that today the fantasies popularized by 007 have a stronger place in audiovisual culture than the realistic spy stories more usually found in literature.¹

It is in this context that I would like to place three topical spy films which resemble those realistic television shows but were more popular than them. *The Good Shepherd* (2006) obtained close to \$100 million worldwide, a modest success replicated in the same year by a film that was to win the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and earned about \$77 million worldwide, the German *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*). Later would appear *L'affaire Farewell* (*Farewell*, 2009), a French film that lacked the commercial impact of the other two but enjoyed a long career on the film festival circuit. It is my hypothesis that these three films achieved this relative success because they touched on issues that were relevant to audiences, and they did so by departing from contemporary mainstream, action-oriented, representations of spy life. At the same time, they have remained far from the box-office success of films that opted for the action spy formula in recent years. In

2006 *Casino Royale* grossed \$594 million worldwide, reaching number four on the yearly box-office list, while *Mission Impossible III* obtained \$397 million and reached number eight. In 2007 *The Bourne Ultimatum* was number seven, earning \$442 million worldwide, and in 2008 *Quantum of Solace* grossed \$586 million, reaching number nine. *Taken*, in 2009, obtained \$226 million to become number twenty, and by the end of 2010 *Salt* had grossed \$293 million and stood at number twenty-one.² In comparison, and like their television counterparts, *The Good Shepherd*, *Das Leben der Anderen* and *L'affaire Farewell* didn't do so well because they partially failed to provide the experience relished by audiences. This article will analyse these films in an attempt to throw light on some of the reasons why they may have been assigned this place as culturally relevant but at the same time marginal products.

The several cycles of the post-World War II spy film have been defined by their degree of verisimilitude and moral conviction about espionage. Influenced by the March of Time newsreels, 1940s docu-dramas like *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) and *13 Rue Madeleine* (1947) used actual footage and were clearly propagandistic, while 1950s films like *Five Fingers* (1952) began to consider espionage more ambiguously. The 1960s saw the appearance of two of the most popular forms of the genre: the Bond films, based on the Fleming novels of the 1950s, and the adaptations of John le Carré and Len Deighton. Bond inhabited a world of glamorous consumerism and moral certainty, while *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* (1965) and *The Ipcress File* (1965) offered realism, questioning moral absolutes and the ethics of espionage. In the 1970s the political thriller replaced espionage with political intrigue and conspiracy, reflecting a mood of mistrust and fear produced by actual events in the United States. As a reaction to the centrality of this conspiracy genre, in the 1980s le Carré's novels were adapted for television in the United Kingdom, a format that allowed lengthier and more complex narratives than film. The BBC's multipart series *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1980), *Smiley's People* (1982) and *A Perfect Spy* (1988) returned to the realistic accounts of spy life and its difficulties, featuring protagonists who were even more ordinary and methodical than the film version of *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*'s Alec Leamas.³

The spy film shares this reliance on verisimilitude with its literary sources. It has been argued that the function of this verisimilitude is to produce simplified versions of history that reflect the fantasies of mass audiences about historical change, explained through conspiracies and the efforts to stop them. Spy stories alleviate anxieties about the individual's lack of effective agency since history is presented as the consequence of the secret agent's work. Two main versions of history would emerge from the genre, which would bear similarities to the two main cycles of the spy film mentioned above: one would see conflict between nations as inevitable, its only solution to be found in the individual, male, hero; the other would attempt to achieve greater verisimilitude by dwelling on the complexity of events and their moral ambiguity. The first trend would have its roots in the pre-1914 and World War I generation that included, among others, Erskine Childers and John Buchan, and revived in the 1950s work of Ian Fleming. The second trend, initiated in the late 1920s and 1930s by the generation of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene, was refreshed in the 1960s by Len Deighton and John le Carré.⁴ The heroic-spy trend relies on the power of citizens to influence history whereas the realist one is far more sceptical about it, usually



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underscoring the power of forces above the individual.

This argument echoes cultural interpretations of spy fiction which have tended to view it as metaphor for the conflict between individual subjectivity and social organization, voicing public distrust of the distance created by the social system from the subjects that constitute it.⁵ Cultural commentators have invariably noted the genre's political relevance, and it continues to be discussed as a tale of citizenship and citizens' distrust of a state that contradicts their sense of justice.⁶ Spy fiction also voices social anxieties regarding work, disclosing the ways in which bureaucracy and corporate structures produce the same alienation, moral ambiguity and uncertainty experienced by secret agents.⁷

Its concerns often match those of crime narratives at large,

although spy fiction has its specificities and special focus. It distinctly reflects the organized nature of social forces, exposing the mechanisms that keep individuals under control. It is concerned with morality, with the system's claim to moral righteousness or the individual's struggle with moral principles and widespread cynicism. It also contains the potential to suggest parallels between the secret agent and the ordinary citizen, both being at the same time essential to the survival of the system and reminders of its shortcomings: they embody the contradictory values of bourgeois society, the ambiguity of the law and a fantasy about the power of the individual to influence history. Furthermore, the genre exhibits a greater awareness of this physical and moral milieu than the rest of the crime genres by placing characters in situations that may expose the contradictions of societies and nations. Finally, the spy story shows, more lucidly than perhaps any other genre, the impact of a globalized world in which national borders are no obstacle to transglobal power.

The more fantasy-based cycle of the spy film still reflects the traditional theme of society as a rigid, ruthless organization but tends to take it for granted, placing more emphasis on life-saving action instead. It abandons the realism of bureaucratic spy work in favour of heroic fantasies, in the process toning down awareness about the centrality of a moral discourse to the formation of society or about the ambiguity of citizenship. On the contrary, defined by their emphasis on characters particularly conscious of their circumstances, realist spy films tend to place this awareness at their centre.

The Good Shepherd, *Das Leben der Anderen* and *L'affaire Farewell* are most original and culturally relevant precisely in the ways they engage with both realism and this heightened awareness. The films' authenticity and documentary feel is produced by the stories' faithfulness to true historical events.

Das Leben is perhaps less explicit about this, although its story echoes the actual impact of a police state on East Berlin in the years preceding the fall of the Wall, while *The Good* and *L'affaire* draw upon true events to different degrees. *The Good* is loosely based on the life of CIA counterintelligence chief James Angleton, and even CIA historians have agreed that, despite its inaccuracies, the film is largely based on actual events and real agents, of whom Edward Wilson is a composite.⁸ *L'affaire* follows, more or less faithfully, the real Farewell operation initiated by Colonel Vladimir Vetrov in the early 1980s and is an adaptation of Sergueï Kostine's novel *Bonjour Farewell* (1997), itself based on true events. Their stories are firmly anchored in historical fact, and their mise-en-scène, which attempts to provide a convincing look of people and places, bolsters that realism. *The Good* shows the glossy look of

a production design financed by a major studio (Universal) and, although real locations may not always be used, they aim at a verisimilitude that sets the film apart from the heroic-spy film cycle. Wilson's grey suits and a colour palette of monochromatic tones and soft, dim lighting evoke his ordinary existence, while the visual style through which the film chooses to portray the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s resorts to a similar drabness in order to suggest realism.⁹ The mise-en-scène of *Das Leben*, a project without the backing of a major studio and shot on a much smaller budget, also imitates the real look of East Berlin and the GDR, whose essence is particularly captured by production design in Wiesler's austere flat. The desaturated greys, greens, browns or beiges, and its soft contrast look manage to evoke authenticity,¹⁰ as do the real locations in East Berlin and the surveillance technology, which happens to be the genuine one used by the Stasi. Standing between the two in terms of budget, *L'affaire* mimics the authentic look of *Das Leben* in its use of colour and real Moscow locations.

The characters' awareness is expressed by focusing on their personal lives and moral transformation, a focus revealed by the films' narrative structure. *The Good* is the story of Wilson's/Matt Damon becoming a spy only to be finally betrayed by his son and its turning points have to do with his personal life. As a child he decides to conceal his father's suicide note, and as a young man he is pushed into marriage by Clover/Angelina Jolie, whose brother and his Yale friends persuade him to join the wartime intelligence organization OSS. The job places a strain on family life, his wife abandons him and his son imitates his secretive life by becoming a spy; Wilson ends up alone, without friends or family, unable to trust anybody. The film explains Wilson's spy life as the result of his childhood desire to deny facts and live a fantasy by concealing his father's suicide note, which would have confirmed the accusations of treason levelled against him. His incapacity to face reality and the desire to purge his father's sin are at the root of his decision to become a spy.

Similarly, the structure of *Das Leben* follows Gerd Wiesler's/Ulrich Mühe personal change. The introduction shows Wiesler's deftness as a Stasi spy and his first surveillance of playwright Georg Dreyman/Sebastian Koch and his girlfriend, actress Christa Maria Sieland/Martina Gedeck. The action complicates when Wiesler is first seen to sympathize with them, after he realizes the surveillance is only a career move for his boss Grubitz, who hopes to clear the way for Minister Hempf's sexual advances on Christa. The film's development has Wiesler finally take the couple's side, moved by their pain, helplessness, and artistic sensibility. In the climax, he is forced to face his ambiguous situation when, following Dreyman's publication of a critical article in the West, Christa is interrogated. When she confesses that Dreyman keeps a non-registered typewriter in his flat, Wiesler runs to remove it before the Stasi search the place, but cannot stop Christa's feeling of guilt and eventual suicide. In the epilogue, Wiesler has been degraded to postman for his treason but finds out that Dreyman's latest book is dedicated to him.

Finally, *L'affaire* is built around the personal trajectories of KGB Colonel Sergei Grigoriev/Emir Kusturica and Pierre



The Good Shepherd



The Good Shepherd

Froment/Guillaume Canet, a French engineer stationed at Moscow's French residence in 1985. From the moment Grigoriev chooses Froment as courier for the secret documents he has decided to leak, the film is most original in using their private and family lives to explain the psychology of the two spies. The atmosphere of distrust that pervades Grigoriev's relationship with his wife Natasha and son Igor plays as a metaphor of a society suffocated by state surveillance, to which Grigoriev hopes to bring prosperity and freedom by starting a new revolution. For his part, Froment is committed to two opposite sets of values: he feels it is his duty to aid his country's secret service but at heart considers his family's safety is to be placed above everything else. The film progresses through meetings between the two men, who in relatively relaxed and intimate conversations tell us about themselves, their dreams and defeats, their taste in music, alcohol or poetry.

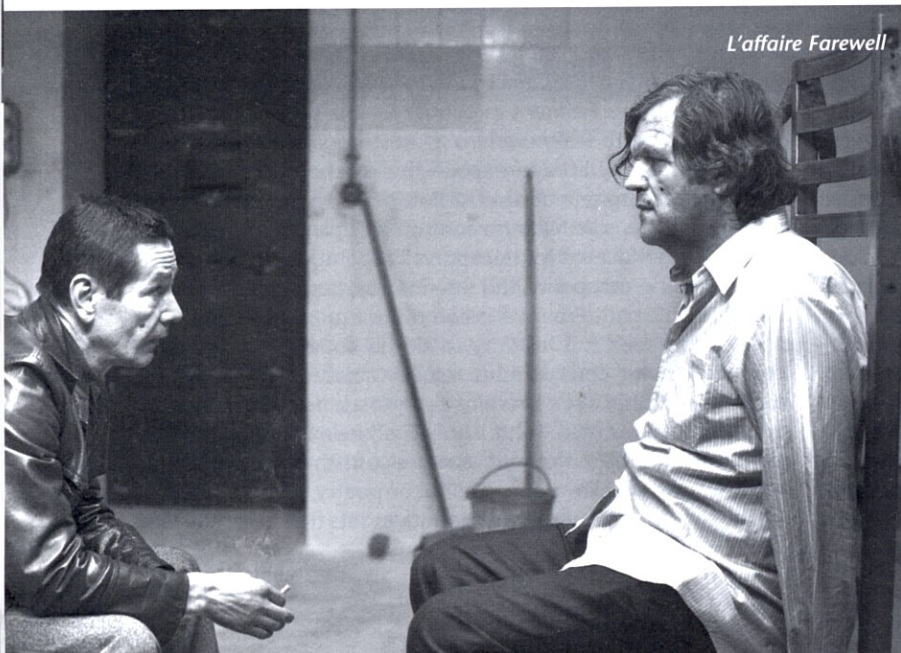
The structure of these three narratives sets the realist spy film



L'affaire Farewell



L'affaire Farewell



L'affaire Farewell

apart from the more mainstream world of the action spy hero. Instead of the emphasis on ordinary life found in them, texts of the *Mission Impossible* or *Bourne* series focus on life-threatening dangers; instead of individuals trapped by their social circumstances, they offer men of action; instead of a mise-en-scène with an interest in the quotidian, they exhibit a mise-en-scène where the everyday turns into the ground of heroic confrontation.

The films are nevertheless different from previous realist spy films in the degree of awareness with which they show, and characters verbalize, the impact of distrust and isolation on personal life. In the le Carré adaptations, characters were more inclined to stoic feats than to express their feelings, and would rather hint at the consequences of spy life than devote time to them. However, in these three films the consequences of espionage are distinctly dramatized by following the process through which the spies come to realize the emptiness of a life poisoned by isolation and distrust. Wiesler discovers a new life, Wilson learns that the secret service is ruining his chances of happiness but remains loyal to his country and his childhood traumas, while Grigoriev's conversations with Froment are explicit about his awareness that treason is the only way out of his frustration. *The Good* is particularly successful in accentuating Wilson's, mainly psychological, predicament. At one point his instructor in London and former Yale teacher Fredericks advises him that distrust, an inevitable consequence of spying, is likely to corrode his life. This will soon be confirmed when he is asked to kill Fredericks, whose choice of male lovers has endangered the secrecy of the organization.

It can be argued that this explicit climate of distrust and the acute sense of inhabiting a world too complex to survive in it echo the contemporary experience of life in Western societies, where modes of belonging to groups or institutions have faded and politics no longer controls a globalized economy. The consequent dissolution of bonds with the social and lack of a socially produced identity paradoxically coexist with the demand of self-definition, of survival by finding a place in a society that is no longer there in any identifiable form. Probably no other social theorist has explored these changes more thoroughly than Zygmunt Bauman, who through his concept of 'liquid modernity' has complained about the death of the modern ideal of the Good Society, where the social as a system was to function for the good of its members. As the bonds between individual lives and communal action disappear in contemporary times, the modern project of social progress is passed on from institutions to individuals, who are expected to work for the common good without the help of any systems or politics that would support them.¹¹ Individuals are no longer central pieces of the community but victims of contemporary social transformations, since they are asked to



still believe in and work towards a society that has nevertheless stopped providing any sense of security in return. In conceiving citizens acutely aware of their inability to cope with the contradictory demands of society, these realist spy films probably voice the anxieties of globalized individuals more vividly than any other trend of contemporary cinema.

But it is the unusual accent placed on the subjectivity of the main characters that defines the three films most clearly, further distinguishing them from the rest of the realist spy tradition in the cinema. Each film favours specific formal strategies to convey this emphasis, but common to them all is a particular exploration of feeling by dwelling on the characters' facial expression. *The Good* makes use of Matt Damon's impassive performance to show his stoicism, a technique that creates images of a suffering Wilson who controls himself to the point of isolation. In one of the first scenes we see him still shocked at the news that a mole has thwarted the Bay of Pigs operation. He is led to a secret file on CIA director Phillip Allen, who becomes one of his suspects. Close-ups and medium close-ups show Wilson at his office desk while he considers the facts until, his back now slightly turned to us in a medium shot, a slow camera movement approaches him while he looks out of the window at a rainy night. The film follows this with the first flashback to 1939, about Wilson's time at Yale, suggesting that he is remembering the origin of the life that led him to this tight spot. Access to his subjectivity is the focus of this office scene, shaping a view of a lonely man forced to face more trouble than he can handle. *Das Leben* employs the same combination of tracking shots and performance to place Wiesler's inner life at the centre of the story, punctuating his change. After Dreyman receives a call telling him that his friend Jerska, a blacklisted drama director, has hanged himself, Dreyman plays the piano composition that Jerska brought him as a present: Sonata for Good Men. Listening from the attic, Wiesler is moved by the

music while the camera tracks around him until we see his face and a tear rolling down his cheek. The same attention to the characters' sensibility appears in *L'affaire*, but here it is expressed through scenes in which Grigoriev's inner life is allowed to come to the surface. Twice we see him and his wife watch super 8 films they shot during their stay in Paris, when their son Igor was only a child. The atmosphere of nostalgia for the past is not as powerful as the sense of having enjoyed their only moments of real freedom, away from the constraints of life in the Soviet Union. As in Wiesler's case, the music, nondiegetic now, collaborates with performance to hint at the causes of Grigoriev's treason.

The lengthy, relaxed tracking shots of *The Good* and *Das Leben* are a sign of the three films' most salient formal aspect: the slow pace produced by the segments centred on the characters' subjectivity, which alternate with more conventional action scenes. Perhaps the clearest example of the three, *L'affaire* moves between action sequences, not different from those in spy thrillers and here involving high officials and presidents of state, and more relaxed sections devoted to the characters' family life or to Grigoriev's meetings with Froment. We see them drink together while Grigoriev asks for cognac or French poetry, symbols of the Western way of life that he misses, in return for his information.

A particular case of this narrative structure is illustrated by crosscutting, a strategy of continuity editing often used to increase the pace of the narrative, but which however serves *The Good* and *Das Leben* to articulate the processes that define the characters' personalities. Crosscutting does not accelerate the rhythm of the two films but contributes to the careful delineation of subjectivity by decreasing the pace of the narratives. One of the key sequences in the middle section of *The Good* crosscuts a quarrel between Wilson and his wife Clover with a CIA operation in a Latin American country. While Clover com-

plains about his secretive life, Wilson receives a phone call and launches the operation. We see the soldiers enter what seems a presidential residence while the family crisis breaks loose at Wilson's home and his son eavesdrops on his parents from upstairs, a habit born out of the desperate need to know his father which will later turn him into a spy. Wilson's required discretion with his job is pulling his family apart, and crosscutting from his life as a spy to his personal life as husband and father illustrates it. Crosscutting is even more central to the narrative structure of *Das Leben*, since it allows the story to move from Dreyman and Christa's world to Wiesler's spying, and it is Wiesler's reactions to the story of the couple that become the real core of the film. Furthermore, crosscutting voices Wiesler's subjectivity, transformed under the influence of these artists' lives and of art itself. The most significant scene in this respect happens after Christa is abused by Hempf in his car and an angry Wiesler, watching from the attic, decides to intervene. By ringing the main door's bell he leads Dreyman downstairs just in time for him to see Christa get out of Hempf's car. She walks upstairs, lies down on the bed and asks Dreyman, who has followed her, to just hold her, an unhurried tender moment enhanced by nondiegetic piano music and meant to suggest the system's ruthless grip on people. The scene then cuts to Wiesler listening in the attic, whose face denotes his sympathy for the couple.

These scenes deal with the impact of institutions on people, while showing that it is in their everyday lives, in their desires, dreams and aspirations, that lie the seeds of rebellion and thus of hope for a better future. While these films illustrate the dissolution of social bonds theorized by Bauman, they also suggest the existence of a positive response on the part of individuals which social theorist Alain Touraine has termed 'the subject'.¹² To Touraine, individuals inhabit societies where they can still create themselves as free agents by both fighting for their rights and opposing the world of consumption, violence and war. It is in situations of injustice or attack on human rights, in which a reaction is needed, that individuals can show this willingness to be the agents of their own existence.¹³ Touraine's subject is an abstract notion present in the behaviour of individuals when they oppose everything that prevents them from mastering their own lives. It originates when they develop self-consciousness, learn to speak about themselves and realize that they are entitled to human rights.¹⁴ The emphatic subjectivity of these three realist spy films voices the characters' consciousness about their right to construct their own lives. While *The Good* shows this need frustrated by Wilson's notion of duty, which leads him to personal undoing, *Das Leben* and *L'affaire* exemplify the subject's potential for personal and social transformation.

The three films exhibit the intensified continuity that, to David Bordwell, has pervaded contemporary Hollywood films and become the baseline style for international popular cinema. An intensification of established techniques of classical continuity whose purpose is still to help viewers make sense of the story in space and time, intensified continuity consists of fast editing, extreme lens lengths, close shots and wide-ranging camera movements.¹⁵ Writing in 2006, David Bordwell argued that the last decades had seen an increasing editing speed, to the point that films were on average cut faster than at any other time in US studio filmmaking—the average shot length was between 3 and 6 seconds. *The Good*, *Das Leben* and *L'affaire*, although mostly within the pattern of intensified continuity, clearly

depart from it in their more subjective sections, which are far more relaxed than intensified continuity would promise.

The Good, *Das Leben* and *L'affaire* are most original in the use to which they put this modification of intensified continuity. They offer a variation on previous realist spy films by placing an emphasis on subjectivity unusual in mainstream contemporary Hollywood and more likely to be found in independent Hollywood and non-Hollywood cinema. While the three British television series of the 1980s based on le Carré's novels showed interest in the consequences of spy life, turned their protagonists into tormented heroes, and avoided the exhilarating rhythm of the action spy film, they were mostly concerned with the precise machinery of the secret service, with the way assessment of human beings and gathering information about them became the core of spy work. Although the secret agent gained centrality, it did not reach the degree exhibited by these three films, where events themselves are not as relevant as their description of the spy's personal trajectory. These three narratives depart most clearly from previous realist spy films in that their emphatic subjectivity does not only reflect the defeat of individuals against institutions but it also exhibits the relevance of intimacy and personal life to the constitution of individual identity. Most specifically, they show how the spy's private life is the site where the transformative capacities of the individual are seen to either give in to external pressure or develop a consciousness that will envision a different society created through individual agency. They illustrate how it is in the realm of personal life that socially transformative action can take place.

In this sense, the BBC television series *A Perfect Spy*, the last of the le Carré adaptations, becomes a link between classic and recent realist spy films. It showed, as does *The Good*, how the psychology of a spy was shaped by family life: Magnus Pym/Peter Egan learned to betray from the example of his father, a conman, and ended up committing suicide when he could no longer bear that kind of existence. *A Perfect Spy* is probably le Carré's most autobiographical work, since the author has acknowledged that his spy novels reflect nostalgia for the values of a lost world where people could still trust institutions, and has explained this need as a reaction to his own family life and in particular to his father, a compulsive liar whom he could never trust.¹⁶ *A Perfect Spy* posits this distrust of institutions as the consequence of a family life tainted by deceit, and thus connects the preoccupations of the classic realist spy narrative with a series of motifs that have resurfaced in the spy film and television of the last decade, and which concern the role of private life in social change.

Spies who attempt to reconcile their jobs with family life have become quite a fashion in the US American film and television of the past decade. *Alias*, 24, the *Spy Kid* saga (2001, 2002, 2003), *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005), *Killers* (2010) or *Fair Game* (2010) join *The Good*, *Das Leben* and *L'affaire* in offering a new view of the spy's private world. Jack Z. Bratich has argued that, whereas previous films and television separated domestic from professional life and one affected the other only occasionally, now the connection between the two is central to the stories.¹⁷ Thus to Miranda J. Brady, *Alias* exhibits the expected conventions of the spy genre, but it introduces a family focus centred around its main character, Sydney Bristow, a white American female spy played by Jennifer Garner. In the midst of post-9/11 social anxiety about the degradation of the family unit and the infiltration of American security, she offers comfort

by staying a sexually upright citizen, which preserves familial normalcy and, ultimately, the American nation.¹⁸ Bratich gives the topic a wider scope by discussing the recent tendency of popular culture to present spies as everyday people. Spies are turned into family men and women in television and film, while reality television makes secret agency public by teaching participants to detect deception. The purpose is to turn every citizen into a spy, an act of domination that at the same time opens ways for resistance since citizens may turn spy tactics against the state. Besides, the popularization of the spy means creating a people's secret agent, a hero drawn from the people, which may also be subversive.¹⁹ While these analyses capture part of the ideological dimension of this new cultural development of the spy text, they fail to distinguish between its fantasy-based and realist trends. *Alias's* sexual and national outlook is directly related to a world that relies on narrative turns that defy verisimilitude, and the status as a people's hero of Jack Bauer in *24*, where speed and suspense are the norm, is certainly different from that of Wilson, Wiesler or Grigoriev. The more glamorous representations of the spy, like *Alias* or *24*, still tend to embed their ordinary protagonists in action heroics that suggest supra-personal ideologies like nationalism, but Wilson, Wiesler and Grigoriev inhabit a world governed by the rules of the everyday, and this affects their meanings. These recent realist spy films show the impact of private, family life on the discourses articulated by the realist cycle but deflect its relevance away from nationalism and towards more individual concerns. In doing so, they show their appropriation of the same intimacy that has featured so prominently in action spy films and television series, here deployed as index of the transformative potential of a conscious subjectivity.

Seen from the broader perspective of the crime film, these texts deal not so much with crime as with its effect on human beings. This has always been the case of the realist spy film, which has returned in the last few years in order to express contemporary worries, not through hyperbolic threats or world conspiracies, but in this more mundane form that points to the concerns of everyday life. By emphasizing the links of spies with ordinary life and people, by providing an account of espionage that resembles real life, *The Good*, *Das Leben* and *L'affaire* increase the awareness of both characters and viewers about society as an organization, the centrality of a moral discourse to its formation, and the ambiguity of citizenship. The protagonists of these boosted versions of the realist branch of the spy genre are particularly sensitive to the moral trap society has set for them. The secret agent's subversive potential as people's hero noted by Bratich is concretized in films centred on the experience of facing a society which demands everything and provides next to nothing. But the films' specific relevance is to be found in a realm closer to the subjectivity and the status of individuals than to such supra-personal notions as society or nation. These spy dramas of the real show the personal perspective of individuals on their situation through visual techniques that strive to explain subjectivity as a consequence of real living conditions, but it is the subjective experience that matters, it is the intense look of characters that leads us back to the real world. The realist spy film makes us witnesses to the defeat of the self against societies and nations but at the same time it vindicates the centrality of that self. This vindication demonstrates that the realist spy film, traditionally sceptical of the individual's capacity to change society, has embraced a discourse about the political power of private life, in which citizens

may find awareness of their rights as human beings. This blend of hope and pessimism might explain the mixed response of audiences to the three films.

A Perfect Spy provided a kind of drama sensitive to psychology and the minutiae of ordinary life that had no continuity in television or film until the release of *The Good Shepherd*, *Das Leben der Anderen* and *L'affaire Farewell*, but these were joined by another film based on actual events: *Breach* (2007), a US American film relatively successful at the box office that focused on the personal relationship between a senior agent (Chris Cooper) suspected of spying and a clerk (Ryan Phillippe) sent to investigate him. The similarity of its main topic, whether being a secret agent is really worth it given the way it destroys your personal life, with those of the previously discussed three films, and their difference from the rest of the contemporary spy genre, suggest the currency of its concerns, as does the recent release of Carl Colby's documentary *The Man Nobody Knew* (2011), in which he investigates the life of his own father, former CIA Director William Colby, from both a personal and public perspective. Finally, the fact that a new version of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* has just been produced by Working Title and directed by Swedish Tomas Alfredson, known for the 2008 hit *Lat den rätte komma in* (*Let the Right One In*), confirms both the contemporary relevance of the realist spy film and its transnational appeal.

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Notes

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- 3 Alan R. Booth, 1991 "The Development of the Espionage Film," in *Spy Fiction, Spy Films and Real Intelligence*, ed. Wesley K. Wark (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 145-154.
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- 9 John Pavlus, "Ghost in the Machine," *American Cinematographer*, February (2007): 44-45.
- 10 Rachael K. Bosley, "Living Dangerously in East Germany," *American Cinematographer*, March (2007): 16-18.
- 11 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 6-8.
- 12 Unlike Freud's or Lacan's notions of the subject, which were essentially psychological, Touraine's is basically social since it emerges through the individuals' interaction with their community.
- 13 Alain Touraine, *A New Paradigm for Understanding Today's World*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Cambridge, Malden: Polity, 2007 (2005)), 101-143.
- 14 Alain Touraine, *Thinking Differently*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge, Malden: Polity, 2009 (2007)), 120-124.
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- 16 Randall Wright, *John le Carré: The Secret Centre*, (2000; London: BBC). Television documentary.
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- 19 Bratich, 133-162.

Hiding from Significance

DOCUMENTED DISINTERESTEDNESS IN *WINNEBAGO MAN*

By AMIR KHAN

Marking the distinction between art and criticism is necessary in a discussion not of film per se, but of documentary film, which arguably straddles worlds of art and/or criticism. Is an effectively rendered documentary an example of art, or criticism, or both? This question bears on what I want to say about Ben Steinbauer's *Winnebago Man* (2009), a film documentary which is an example, I will argue, of what Robin Wood calls "oppositional cinema".¹ Therefore, we must ask not only if *Winnebago Man* is oppositional in the sense that Wood uses the term, but also, if it is indeed cinema—in the way Wood conceives of cinema. I will answer this latter question first by differentiating between art and criticism, noting that we are more likely to conceive of documentary film as criticism, as opposed to art. In order to make the case that (this) documentary, is indeed, or can be, art, we must take pains to show that criticism is, or can be, art as well.

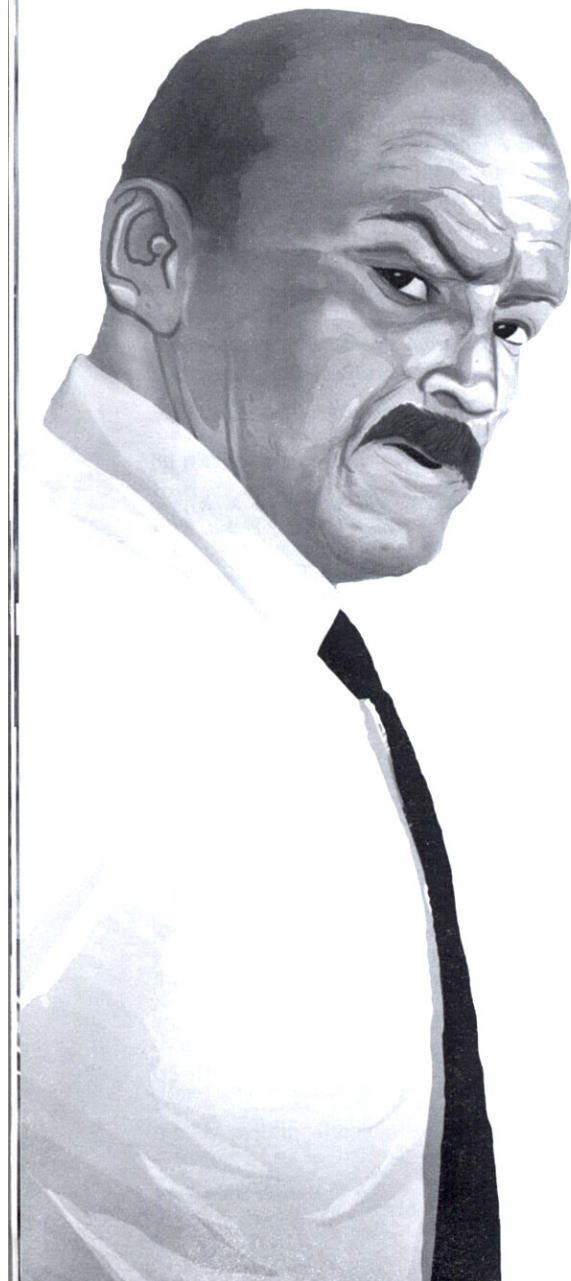
John Grierson, arguing unequivocally in favour of documentary film as art (as opposed to merely "lecture films"²) undercuts the salience of dramatic narrative as necessary to art. Grierson makes this convincing plea for his chosen genre of film:

[D]ocumentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the ... mechanics of the studio I do not mean ... to suggest that the studios cannot in their own manner produce works of art to astonish the world. There is nothing ... to prevent the studios going really high in the manner of theatre or the manner of fairy-tale. My separate claim for documentary is simply that in its use of the living article, there is also an opportunity to perform creative work.³

In restricting himself to the "use of the living article", much as a critic of literature must restrict him/herself not to the creation of art, but to the description of it, Grierson makes a case that description itself—rather than, say, fiction—can occupy positions of, or "perform", creative work.

The distinction between art and criticism, as though one is doing one or the other, is muddled, I think, even in Matthew Arnold's panegyric to criticism, his classic text of 1864 on "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time".⁴ To the proposition that "[t]he critical power is of lower rank than the creative," he answers, quite simply: "True."⁵ He notes that "the exercise of a creative power" is truly the "highest function of man."⁶ Yet he also warns that in assenting to the truth of this proposition, the following should be kept in mind: "[I]t is undeniable, also, that men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art They may have it in well-doing, they may have it in learning, they may have it even in criticising."⁷ If art is necessarily tied to the exercise of a free creative power, and if

Illustration for *Winnebago Man* promotion





criticism is also bred of such a power, then what Arnold does in this essay (amongst other things) is tie the function of criticism not to the function of art, but to art itself. If one commits to *this* proposition, it becomes somewhat hard to follow, as the essay progresses, Arnold's distinction between art and criticism—particularly his emphasis on a critical stance of “disinterestedness.”⁸ That is, there is no good reason that a stance of “disinterestedness” is not equally necessary for the production of art (let alone criticism).

Without getting too bogged down on what we or anyone else understands “disinterestedness” to mean or say, I'll quote here from Arnold as a reminder of how *he* defines the term:

[H]ow is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called “the practical view of things”; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which ... are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with. Its business is ... simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas.⁹

Criticism and art exist at either side of these “true and fresh ideas.” The critic engages in “analysis and discovery”¹⁰ of these ideas on the one hand, and the artist in their “synthesis and exposition” (related to “exposure”—I will return to this) on the other. In composing a work of art, the artist synthesises and exposes precisely those true and fresh ideas already brought to bear by the critic.¹¹ Though we often think of the work of art preceding the act of criticism, Arnold notes that because of the complexity of (his) modern times, the great artist *requires* criticism in order to create art; so the critical effort must precede the artistic one.

[E]very one can see that a poet, for instance, ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in

poetry; and life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it Shakespeare was no deep reader. True; but in the Greece of Pindar and Sophocles, in the England of Shakespeare, the poet lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power; society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive. And this state of things is the true basis for the creative power's exercise, in this it finds its data, its materials, truly ready for its hand.¹²

The artist is to give shape and meaning to the currents of thought he/she is immersed in. But because such ideas are not so easily forthcoming, a strong critical effort rooted in discovery and analysis must first buttress an act of synthesis and exposition to follow. Great works of art only exist after a great critical effort, which, for Arnold, explains why his particular time or “epoch”¹³ is so lacking in great art. Too much criticism is required at the outset; too few willing to commit to it. Why 19th century England should be less easily “permeated by fresh thought” (as opposed, say, to Renaissance England) may indeed have something to do with the complexity of modernity, as Arnold suggests. It is beyond the scope of this paper to pursue the matter further. Whatever the case, I'll note, lastly about Arnold, that when fresh thoughts are not so readily available, the critical effort is not to revive art in the immediate present, but to continue the work of discovery and analysis so that art is given the materials to thrive once again in future. In such a case, Arnold notes, the only true and fruitful creative activity will reside in criticism itself, because “at some epochs no other creation is possible.”¹⁴ What this paper will address is the notion that our times mirror Arnold's, as far as film goes, and that a film like *Winnebago Man*, by virtue of its critical effort, manages to achieve something we can call filmic art.

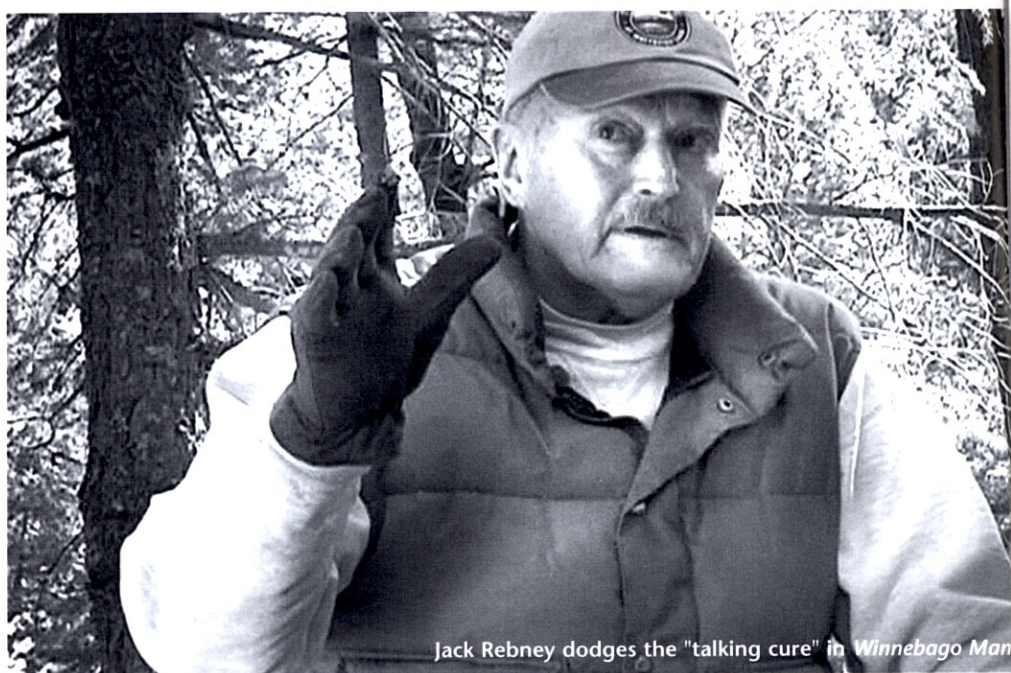
Winnebago Man documents the Internet fame and fallout of Jack Rebney, a man hired in 1989 by Winnebago Industries to star in a promotional video for the Itasca Sunflyer RV. Shooting for the video was done in 100 degree heat in Forest City, Iowa (as noted by Rebney in the film) and the outtakes depict Rebney, routinely, losing his temper. Prior to completing the

project, the shooting crew disseminated these outtakes which were then copied and redistributed widely enough that Winnebago Industries was forced to let go of Rebney. The film less documents the occurrence of *these* events than their eventual digital distribution followed by Internet notoriety and subsequent hermitry of Jack Rebney i.e. his story as a "viral" phenomenon. It was on YouTube, for example, that Rebney's moniker as the Winnebago Man was entrenched.

The immediate, knee-jerk denigration of youth, and then, not because of anything they have done, but, more pressingly, what they fail to do, is certainly one characteristic not of the Winnebago man in the selection of clips that "went viral" (first through the somewhat laborious reproduction of video tape in the 1990s, and then, through the digital reproduction of these clips online), but of Jack Rebney as presented to us in Ben Steinbauer's film. The film documents, strangely enough, not the life and times of Rebney (though there is some of that), but, more peculiarly, the making of the very film we are watching. If we take a man like Rebney as someone who is, truly, hiding from significance, what the internal dramatic tension of this film manages to reveal or document is not his exposure to us, but our eventual exposure to him. Near the end of the film, at the conclusion of Rebney's appearance at the *Found Footage Festival*, Joe Pickett asks Rebney: "Do you hate us?" What this film shows is Rebney coming to terms with his "audience", whom he initially dismisses as "crazies" and "lunatics", but in the end is willing to acknowledge as "my people", "clever, quick and observant". So the key transformation or recognition in this film is not of an audience coming to terms with the existence of characters like Rebney in this world (through, say, the sympathetic recall of what we expect to be his "troubled" childhood or marriage), but of an audience coming to terms with its own stance of disinterestedness in this world, an exposure that risks ridicule.

Much is and obviously will be made about our desire to consume characters like Rebney in this fashion—anonously, in small doses, as mere spectacle—linking our fascination with the man to baser impulses. The film acknowledges this possibility early on, detailing cases of cyberbullying, juxtaposing Rebney's internet fame and celebrity with that of other modern day "freaks"—notably Ghyslain Raza and Aleksey Vayner.¹⁵ Certainly when listening to the testimony of Charlie Sotelo and Cinco Barnes, we are reminded that many do indeed consume Rebney as mere spectacle, interested in precisely the impersonal appeal of watching a man being degraded, or degrading himself: "It's [only] funny when you don't know him ... there's no reason to know the guy. That really spoils it all."

But it is never entirely clear that Rebney actually degrades himself. He makes a spectacle of himself, but it is certainly not true that Rebney is a victim of cyberbullying the way Ghyslain Raza is, or humiliated in quite the same way as Alexei Vayner. If Rebney feels humiliated, it is in knowing the maliciousness behind the origin and *original* dissemination of the clips, con-



Jack Rebney dodges the "talking cure" in *Winnebago Man*

ceived and distributed by "co-workers" as a means to get him fired. But now, many more years after the fact, it is not the malicious motives behind the videos' creation/reproduction that are on display. The consumption of these videos in anonymity puts this sort of consideration out of reach. The idea that Rebney is *still* sore because of losing his position as a Winnebago salesperson implies that the job was one he coveted in the first place. But what Steinbauer documents is that this gig was used as cover for an earlier humiliation, that of being rejected by, or in rejecting, the world of professional news broadcasting. It may be a tough pill to swallow, knowing you have been ousted from a position you did not really care for. But this only compounds an original anger and humiliation in being let go as a newsman. So the true source of Rebney's humiliation is nowhere to be found in the Winnebago clips themselves. Whatever it is that Rebney fears, or for whatever reason it is that he is hiding from significance, embarrassment at appearing in *these* particular clips seems too farfetched a proposition to sustain. Steinbauer expected to have to deal with feelings of *schadenfreude*, taking Douglas Rushkoff's suggestion that his foray into Rebney's life is the solidification in him of some "collective cultural guilt." But as the movie progresses, these diagnoses seem quaint and unfounded. Whatever the source of Steinbauer's fascination with Rebney, it is not certain that Steinbauer's interest stems from *schadenfreude*. He *is* interested to know where his obsession with Rebney comes from. Steinbauer sought out Vayner, but never claimed to be "obsessed" with him in the same way, never made a film about him. He pays lip service to the obvious and conventional reading of "guilt," but the film just as quickly dispenses with it. Because a discussion of guilt does not arise anywhere in the latter portion of the film, Steinbauer certainly leaves room, both for himself and for us as viewers, to explore other options.

What else could be the source of Steinbauer's/our fascination with Rebney? One thing could be that Rebney provides us a *rant without content*. Rebney's rage is not prescriptive, does not nominate anything (other than trivial things, like files, or

the weather, or the slamming of a door) to be angry about. Part of the hilarity is in knowing the reaction is so out of proportion with the circumstances as to elicit awe and wonder. And part of the fascination with Rebney is that he reminds us it is okay to act (seemingly) disproportionately. We all may do it in the confines of our minds, but how many of us, even when the stakes are so small, are willing to entertain such outbursts?

Rebney reminds us there are no ordinary circumstances under which one can express the type of rage he expresses. Yet why are we largely uninspired by Rebney's more "extraordinary" rage (vis-à-vis Dick Cheney, to whom I will return)? Is this an indication of our own aloofness, our own irresponsible stance of precisely the sort of disinterestedness that someone like Bertolt Brecht wholeheartedly opposes in his conception of what aesthetics can do through "epic theatre?"¹⁶ So it seems our fascination with Rebney is of no real aesthetic value at all, and is, merely, an admission of guilt.

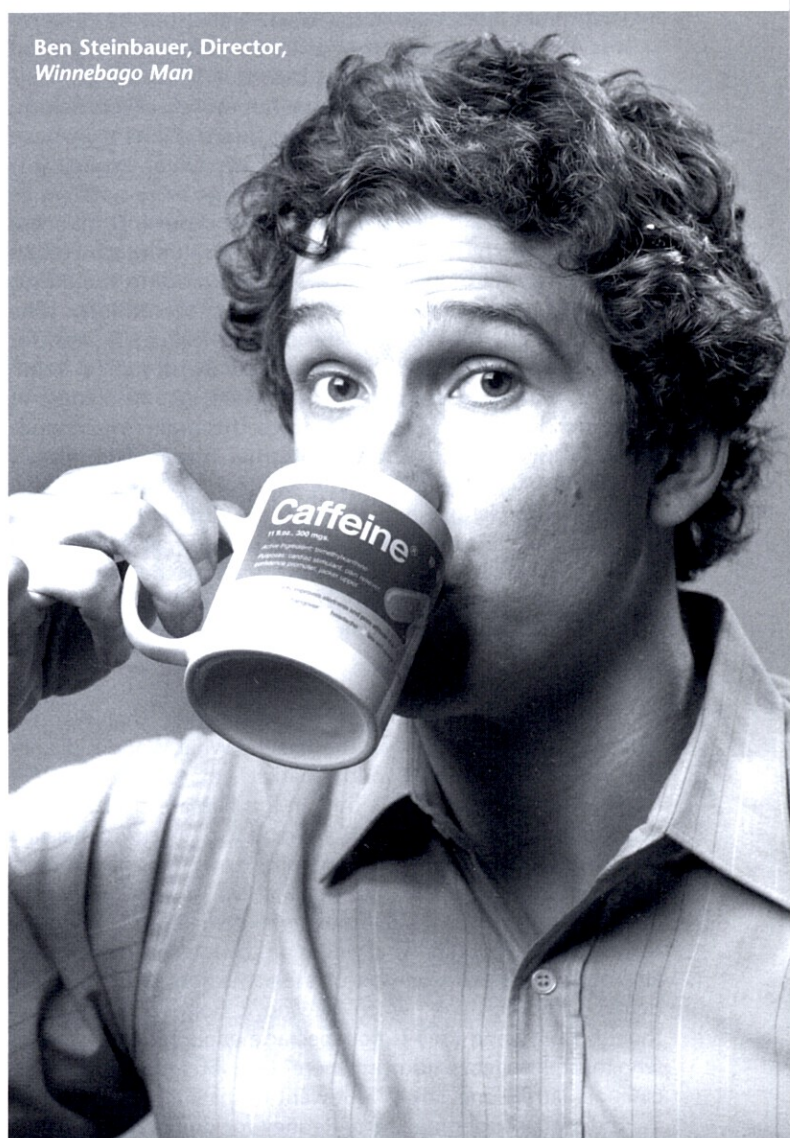
Though Brecht may have no business with the *Winnegago* man, I do think Robin Wood's notion of "oppositional cinema,"¹⁷ derived from Brecht, is a pertinent point of departure for discussing this film. And though Wood himself, at times, is dismissive of the "youth market,"¹⁸ no one more convincingly places us at the precipice of what movies, in true oppositional fashion, are capable (or incapable) of, hence helps us to understand why viewers of movies nowadays, seemingly, have every reason to be drawn to (mere) spectacle. The youthful stance of disinterestedness in the world is perhaps the result of a certain type of aloofness, but this aloofness is itself the result of being unable to wage an effective opposition, a sentiment Wood is sympathetic to when he asks: "is an oppositional cinema possible?"¹⁹—which does not mean that its impossibility is the result of a disengaged movie audience, but that movies themselves are incapable or unwilling to mobilize resistance.

An "oppositional cinema" is not one that fosters and demands immediate social change but merely lays the groundwork for changes in consciousness. The three films Wood calls "masterpieces"²⁰ of oppositional cinema are Howard Hawks's *Rio Bravo* (1959), Leo McCarey's *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!* (1958), and Max Ophüls' *The Reckless Moment* (1949). The content of these films is less at issue here than Wood's discussion of the conditions in which these films were created. Despite their true oppositional status, he notes that it is "not just possible but probable that their makers were completely unaware of their potentially explosive content."²¹ So precisely what makes these films effective as radical oppositional cinema is their disinterested stance, what Wood characterizes as a "lack of self-consciousness."

Crucial to these works ... was the relative lack of self-consciousness. Hawks, for example, could become, intermittently, a great artist: the circumstances of Classical Hollywood permitted it, even encouraged it, without the least awareness of doing so *Rio Bravo* can be read as offering a complete and satisfying (if primitive) philosophy of human existence, developed spontaneously and organically out of a whole complex of interlocking factors (genre, writers, actors, cinematographers), while Hawks himself appeared to believe that he was just 'having fun.' That kind of unself-consciousness, a prerequisite of full, free-flowing creativity, is no longer possible.²²

Here is an aloofness or disinterestedness that Wood is champi-

Ben Steinbauer, Director,
Winnegago Man



oning, the sort that may not lead to an immediate and sudden social change or realization, but whose work is carried out slowly and gradually. Noting that "there is no indication whatever that [these films] led to any social change,"²³ Wood asks, promptly, what "was/is their use?"²⁴ His answer is precisely that these films began to stir the pot, as "those tensions that finally erupted in the great radical movements of the 60s/70s are already demonstrably *there* [i.e., depicted in those films]. They just hadn't been recognized for what they were."²⁵

Yet Wood, admirably, does not establish any *causal* link between these films and, say, the uprisings that occurred in America in and around the Vietnam war. What he suggests is that the "use" of these films comes only in hindsight. We cannot, in the moment, use these films to predict what may come; yet these films stand as evidence to the sorts of tensions and frustrations that have already passed. So in one sense, oppositional cinema is never possible, because an oppositional cinema cannot know, or be aware of, beforehand, the sorts of dragons it is out to slay. But in another sense, the type of opposition we need now is precisely the sort rooted in a disinterested free-play of ideas, come what may. Whether this sort of cinema is possible nowadays is, according to Wood, doubtful:

Fifty years from now, circa 2053, will critics be discerning comparable radical impulses in today's Hollywood movies? It's possible, I suppose, but it seems unlikely. For a start, we have become far more self-conscious, hence more wary, more on our guard. Films may have become more "daring" in terms of sexual explicitness and extreme violence, but such things have nothing to do with social/political subversion and our internal censors will warn us against anything more dangerous than the spectacle of crashing cars and exploding buildings, created with the aid of the latest technology. The grotesquely reactionary period we live in is not far enough removed from the upheavals of radical feminism, black power, gay rights, to have lost awareness of them; their partial cooption into the mainstream does not entirely remove their potential threat. Filmmakers are now largely under the control of vast capitalist enterprises whose aim seems to be distraction, not disturbance ... But the majority [of people], as yet, remain in the state of stupefied mystification that corporate capitalism requires for its continuance: Shock us, make us laugh, but please, please, don't encourage us to think.²⁶

Perhaps it is unfair to suggest, as I did earlier, that Wood is entirely dismissive of the "youth market." What Wood is dismissive of, rather, is the "youth market" that "laps ... up"²⁷ Hollywood films. But the "youth" in this film are clearly not (at least not solely) consumers of Hollywood films. Nick Prueher says to Rebney: "You're our Harrison Ford," and the line-ups here occur not in front of the AMC but the *Red Vic Movie House*. So does it follow necessarily that those who demand to be shocked, to laugh at Rebney (and viral videos on the Internet more generally) are merely an extension of the same sort of people who demand "not-to-think" when viewing a Hollywood movie, as though Hollywood itself is not spectacle enough for these souls who must, inevitably, turn elsewhere? Does Steinbauer, in his fascination with Rebney, truly "not-want-to-think"?

The swift condemnation of Rebney for going a little "Bono on us," recorded in Steinbauer's post-mortem of Rebney's appearance at the San Francisco *Found Footage Festival*, suggests that any attempt by Rebney to try to get his audience to think (i.e., to think like he does, to view the world as he does, with Dick Cheney at the epicentre of American corruption, disintegration) risks marginalizing him. This is further to suggest that the easy consumption of the spectacle of Rebney is all the audience in question is after, and not the consumption of, say, any overwrought political message. How are we to read such a stunning exposure?

At one point in the film, Steinbauer, unsure as to how to proceed with, or make due on, the work he has done in tracking Rebney down, initially suggests setting up a weekly podcast, to which fans of Rebney can tune in to hear, presumably amongst other things, some of his political thoughts/rants. Yet Rebney himself refuses, unwilling to make his political thoughts subject to spectacle/ridicule. Indeed, one wonders why Ben proposes the ludicrous project at all, particularly when, later, he admonishes Rebney precisely for ranting about Dick Cheney: "This is maybe going to be the last piece of film that you ever shoot, the last time that you can be on camera, and this is what you want to say? You've been up here for fifteen years studying the great works ... and this is what you want to impart, is Dick

Cheney?—is how bad Dick Cheney is." The question then is: what exactly is Rebney *supposed* to say? Ben has tried to get Rebney to talk about his childhood, and then his marriage, but all "serious" topics are off limits. Ben can only wonder, indeed, what the hell he is doing.

This maddening oscillation, between interested social engagement (i.e., Steinbauer's personal quest to humanize the man in the videos) and disinterested free-play (precisely the desire by both Ben and his viewing audience to consume characters like Rebney anonymously) means that a true clash is allowed to take place before our eyes and the result is a synthesis; that is, our consumption of Rebney can be viewed as a sort of play, or, rather, a *disinterested form of social engagement* in the name of creating (however primitive) a community—which will, of course, be interpreted/dismissed by some as merely a vulgar indulgence in spectacle. (At around the four minute mark, Mike Mitchell says: "You come upon someone that's seen it and you speak the same language. You just start quoting: "My mind's a piece of shit this morning; I'm blinded by this hotlight.") But this is not the sort of social engagement occurring *elsewhere*. Rather, the debates around which we are normally thought to construct our lives and identities (i.e., Dick Cheney) are themselves elsewhere, not immediately here, providing no currency or language of community, only discord. If the charge to "think", to be oppositional necessarily fractures, ensuring "all human relations [are] characterized by power, dominance, possessiveness, manipulation,"²⁸ why would anyone—logically, emotionally—*want* to think, or rather, think about the things we normally believe thought ought to coalesce around? Can a community of Winnebago man fans provide a launching pad for revolution? Are they and the viewers of this film participating in *any* sort of "oppositional cinema"?

The distinct achievement of this film is in its inadvertent documentation of a political stance of disinterestedness which thrives only in anonymity. That is, there is no reason for *the avoidance of significance as a political stance* to be registered at all in the public consciousness, certainly not through the "traditional" public means of (mass) discourse (i.e., movies, television, newspapers, radio, the Internet). Any interested attempt at pursuing such documentation only risks highlighting interested charlatans anyhow. How to record and then disseminate mass disinterestedness? It is easier to scoff at such a stance precisely because *one cannot engage with it*. Ben Steinbauer was not out to document a political stance of disinterestedness and showcase this to the world; he was out to humanize Jack Rebney. By (disinterested) fluke, he manages to record something deep and lasting—the effective doubling of Rebney and his audience, *both of whom* are hiding from significance. Hence the source of the latter's fascination with the former, and hence Rebney's moving acknowledgment and startling acceptance of this doubling. He has found his community in anonymity, and subsequently, an anonymous community is given voice—though we only know of it through Ben's disinterested efforts. Listen to Rebney's remarkable, and wholly accurate, assessment of events at the end of the film:

In fact what it is, is that, there is apparently really a true camaraderie, with people who see that and who commiserate with this poor belaboured person who says pretty much what comes to his mind when he's met with adversity ... And that's good ... That's really the human condition, is it not? Right there, in simple terms.

But the miracle cannot now be unachieved so it is up to us, simply, to take notice and realize what is demonstrably *there*. Is this cinema oppositional? It is conceived of and executed away from Hollywood. More directly: yes, because it shows that the youth cannot be co-opted, that social engagement will occur on their terms. Power may scoff for now, but if things are happening under the radar of so-called mass popular appeal, who can tell, to be sure, where such efforts will lead.

Arnold reminds us that the work of culture is "slow",²⁹ that its trajectory marks the perfectionist aspiration of human beings. Now the example of Jack Rebney is not what we would assume Arnold to have in mind when he invokes culture, nor does our fascination with Rebney revolve around an aspiration to be like him (he does not set off, say, perfectionist longings). Rebney is clearly not a model of the perfect human. But what the image or screen tends to offer up are unrealistic versions of perfectionism, usually through advertising³⁰ designed to skew or manipulate our tendency to want perfection in the first place—as though the achievement of such perfection *could be* achieved in this lifetime through easy consumption and a definitive commercial transaction with a beginning and end. The only way to reject this branded sort of perfectionism is not by saving or redeeming or curing (through therapy or what have you) an imperfect human before us, but by asserting or reclaiming his imperfections, which is, in a way, to champion his *perfect humanity*.

Ben Steinbauer set out to "discover" and "analyze" the case of Jack Rebney, as well as the source of his own fascination with Rebney. In this way, he is acting as critic, as Arnold intends and employs the term. The work of "synthesis and exposition" is less obvious in this film, and if these two roles characterize the work of the artist, then what Steinbauer has achieved is not art, or, perhaps, not grand art, art projected on a grand scale in terms of drama and narrative. Yet if grand art is not so easily forthcoming these days from the more traditional institutional vehicles of filmmaking (i.e., Hollywood), then what filmmakers can try in the interim is to buttress their creative effort with engaged social criticism, and not the sort that demands interested analysis of politics or society, but which achieves its artistic merit through the disinterested documentation of "real life"—more specifically, what *others* take to be real, i.e., *significant*. Has Steinbauer produced great art or great criticism? He has, in fact, given us semblances of both; what he intended to produce was criticism—a commentary on a social phenomenon after the fact, which does not a priori disqualify him as an artist, particularly if we believe that criticism *can* function as art. Steinbauer's film gains its unique artistic merit because, in its honest pursuit of truth, it manages, tangentially, to "synthesize" and "expose" not Jack Rebney but the stance of disinterested engagement afforded him by his fans (which, ultimately, speaks to reasons behind his own fascination with Rebney; so Steinbauer has exposed, if less fully "discovered," himself in the process as well). In exposing the source of our engagement/disengagement with the world, *Winnebago Man* stakes its claim as true cinematic art, both oppositional and aloof. Here are some concluding words from Grierson:

The best of the tyros [i.e., those apprenticing, or beginning, in the trade of documentary filmmaking] ... believe that beauty will come in good time to inhabit the statement which is honest and lucid and deeply felt ... They are sensible enough to conceive of art as the by-product of a job of work done. The opposite effort to capture the

by-product first (the self-conscious pursuit of beauty, the pursuit of art for art's sake to the exclusion of jobs of work and other pedestrian beginnings), was always a reflection of selfish wealth, selfish leisure and aesthetic decadence.³¹

That art or creation is a by-product of the disinterested and honest documentation of life (which alone characterizes meaningful "work") is the maxim behind Grierson's impressive defence of documentary film as art. Through such exposure (i.e., exposure as "by-product") is the true revelatory power of documentary film made manifest. And though documentary film is not the sole means of achieving cinematic art in our time, its generic power, one feels, has yet to be brought to bear fully.

Notes

- 1 Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Regan ... and Beyond* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 333.
- 2 John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. F. Hardy (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1947), 100.
- 3 Ibid., 101 His emphasis.
- 4 Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A.D. Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), 237-58.
- 5 Ibid., 238.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 246.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., 239.
- 11 Though I am using the term "art" so as to include film in my discussion, Arnold is, very explicitly, discussing literature: "I will limit myself to literature, for it is about literature that the question [of how the creative power works] arises,—the elements with which the creative power works are ideas" 239.
- 12 Ibid., 240-41.
- 13 Ibid., 243.
- 14 Ibid., 258.
- 15 Ghyslain Raza is better known (online) as the "Star Wars Kid". In late 2002, he made a video of himself swinging a golf-ball retriever in the manner of Darth Maul swinging his light saber in *Star Wars: Episode I* (1999). Aleksey Vayner is better known by the title of his video resume, "Impossible is Nothing", posted online in 2006, in which he performs rather superhuman and cartoonish feats in a sincere attempt to land an entry-level finance position with UBS. Both Raza and Vayner's videos were surreptitiously uploaded to the Web and the notoriety received by each was both unwanted and humiliating. The videos remain online today.
- 16 In Brecht's schema, what is traditionally taken to be "aesthetic" is that which is given freedom within established conventional constraints, what he calls "apparatus". Yet the apparatus "at present ... do not work for the general good; the means of production do not belong to the producer". The role of "epic theatre" is to arouse the spectator's "capacity for action", which is, ultimately, to usurp the "aesthetic point of view" in favour of a "sociological point of view", where a consideration of existing power relations are brought to the fore. Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. J. Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 20-22, 35, 37.
- 17 Wood, 333.
- 18 Ibid., xxx.
- 19 Ibid., 333.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 334.
- 23 Ibid., 333.
- 24 Ibid., 334.
- 25 Ibid. His emphasis.
- 26 Ibid., 335.
- 27 Ibid., xxx.
- 28 Ibid., 66.
- 29 Arnold, 250.
- 30 Alan Berliner is documented in the film saying: "Commercials are meant to be these picture perfect, pristine things, with everything being scripted and every composition being carefully composed. It's [i.e., the Winnebago out-takes] our chance to look behind the curtain."
- 31 Grierson, 105.

Lefties and Hippies and Yuppies, Oh My!

DAVID CRONENBERG'S *SCANNERS* REVISITED



By MICHAEL PEPE

Initial reactions to low budget horror films are often as visceral as the themes and imagery that the genre explores and exploits. By the time David Cronenberg's movie *Scanners* was released in early 1981, the filmmaker had already received a host of reviews that questioned the purpose, meaning and morality of his three previously released feature length horror films¹: *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1976), and *The Brood* (1979). The criticism was particularly polarizing as it came at a time when the director was also considered Canada's most promising filmmaker. At a budget that was more than three times that of his previous film,² *Scanners* would receive broad U.S. distribution, some favorable notices, and lead to more ambitious projects. For this reason the movie is considered to be a pivotal one in Cronenberg's career, even though many also consider it to be of lesser thematic interest.

At its surface, *Scanners* is a comic-bookish, sci-fi, male-centric action/adventure fantasy, featuring predictable themes of world domination and good vs. evil; but like much of Cronenberg's work, the movie uses fantastic imagery and sardonic wit to tell a larger than life tale about the directions thirty-something baby-boomers are about to take as they are handed, or grab, the reins of power from the previous generation. The film accomplishes this through an allegorical representation of iconic imagery that wryly refers directly and indirectly to post 1960s political radicals, counterculture hippies, and the nascent development of the young urban professional. When viewed as an allegorical psychodrama, *Scanners* can be seen as an oblique reflection on what might happen when the counterculture becomes the dominant culture. Additionally, through the character of Cameron Vale, Cronenberg is also reflecting on



The banality of the mall is undermined by a scanner's attack on a shopper.

his own rapidly developing career as he makes the transition from the "baron of blood" to a filmmaker with an international reputation that holds critical cachet beyond the horror fanzine. The satirical tone of the film and its allegorical mission, whether conscious or not, is often shrouded by an exhibition of technical skill that reflects Cronenberg's desire to be treated as a serious director working in a popular genre.

The plotline tells the story of a post-World War II "psychopharmacologist", Dr. Paul Ruth/Patrick McGoohan, who markets a tranquilizer for pregnant women called "Ephemerol". The drug has a side effect that causes women to give birth to "scanners"—psychically mutated babies that have telepathic abilities. ConSec, a large corporation with interests in "international security...weaponry and private armies", tries but fails to control the scanners. Now in their mid-thirties, two scanner camps have evolved. The first, an organized group of underground radicals led by Darryl Revok/Michael Ironside, part revolutionary working to bring the world of "normals to their knees", and part young upwardly mobile entrepreneur who is secretly marketing Ephemerol to a new generation of young mothers. The other camp, led by Kim Obrist/Jennifer O'Neill, is a group of meditating, spiritually connected scanners who are trying to find their place in the world of normals.

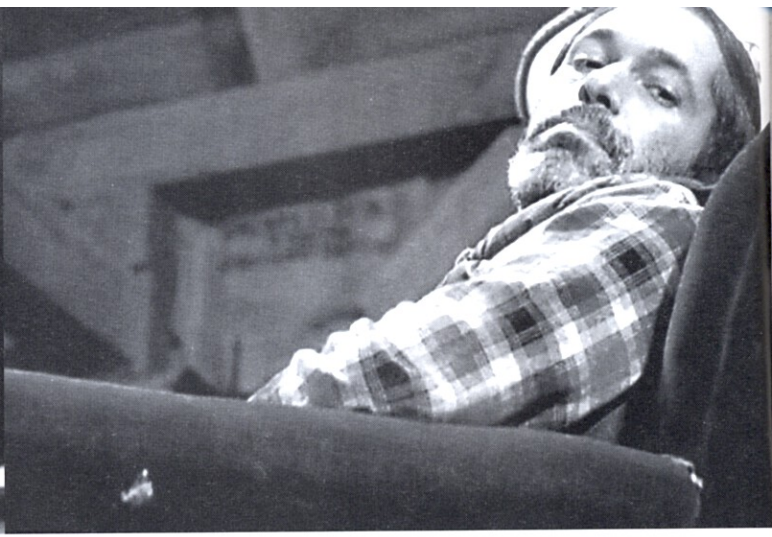
This incredibly intricate and somewhat convoluted narrative is populated by people with unlikely names that seem to sug-

gest something about the nature of their character: Keller is a *killer*, Revok *revokes* the authority of his father and wreaks *havoc* in the process, Vale has a metaphoric *veil* lifted from him that reveals his true identity and purpose, and so on. The convoluted plot and cartoonish characters are given credibility by the weight of Cronenberg's direction, a skill that was evident in his previous and equally fantastic films. Since then, Cronenberg has made a career of contextualizing phantasmagoric narratives featuring surrealistic imagery to tell contemporary stories that resonate with modern audiences.

In the opening shot of the film, Cameron Vale/Stephen Lack, described as an "unaffiliated" scanner by Dr. Ruth, is introduced as a stereotypical 1980s homeless man. Entering through a door marked "EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY", the unkempt Vale wanders through a shopping mall food-court making a meal of what others have left behind. Vale impossibly 'overhears' two older women talk about him in unflattering terms. "Can you believe it?" one asks. "They can let creatures like that in here." The comment may have well been made about Cronenberg's entry into the commercial film industry. During Cronenberg's early career, he was part of the Toronto independent filmmaking scene, drawing inspiration from New York underground filmmakers of the 60s³ at least as much as he did from his embrace of the horror genre. In addition to acerbic film reviews that led to a suspension of funding from

Cameron Vale gets the works: Drugs as prescriptive and transformational.





Dr. Paul Ruth/Patrick McGoochan, the mad scientist;
Benjamin Pierce/Robert Silverman, the bohemian artist

the Canadian Film Development Corporation,⁴ some attacks were personal. In his book of interviews with the filmmaker, Serge Grünberg reprints an article from a Toronto daily written by Cronenberg in the late seventies about how he was evicted from his apartment by "a Protestant spinster lady of 80" for making "pornography".⁵ The landlady in question was referring to *Rabid*, which featured the porn star Marilyn Chambers.

In this context, Cameron Vale can be viewed as Cronenberg's alter ego: an outsider who like the filmmaker may be perceived as coarse, naïve, and even a little perverse, but has a vision, or at least an alternate narrative to offer. As the film progresses, Vale evolves from a dysfunctional homeless man to a catalyst for social transformation. Like his character, Cronenberg is in the process of navigating the possibilities that are presented to him as his career evolves from a maker of cult films to a director of movies that may have broader mass appeal. The psychodrama that unfolds in *Scanners* places Vale outside all of the existing social groups that he investigates and provides the allegorical connection to the 60s terrain by presenting the scanner groups as an approximation or externalization of real-life 60s/70s subculture. Vale's exploration of those groups is a search for an identity, conducted in much the same way an adolescent searches for identity through social cohesion. Throughout the film, Cronenberg uses a variety of techniques to portray Vale as an overgrown adolescent who is uncomfortable in his skin, vulnerable in his inability to hide his naiveté, and prone to demonstrate bouts of rage.

The women in the mall express the discomfort at having to witness the degradation of homelessness while contemptuously imagining that Vale is flirting with them. He punishes one of the women, old enough to be his mother, by telepathically delivering a seizure. The mall Muzak overlaps with and is finally replaced by Howard Shore's dissonant soundtrack. The safe banality of the shopping mall and the consumerism endemic to middle class values are undermined by Vale's attack. Intergenerational war and the subversion of middle-class values and institutions are underlying themes in *Scanners* and are represented as part of the 60s legacy the thirty-something scanners have as their formative background. Near the end of the film, Kim Obrist, leader of the humane sect of scanners, protects herself by making a young ConSec security guard, clad in a militaristic uniform, hallucinate that he is pointing his automatic weapon at his mother. Riddled by guilt, the guard is brought to tears and collapses. The sequence is humorous, poignant,

creepy, and poetic in its expression of the film's central metaphor: that unbridled ambition, the failure to confront ethical dilemmas and accept personal responsibilities, will inevitably lead to social cannibalism and intra/intergenerational warfare. The imagery also reiterates, at this late point of the narrative, the deep distrust of an imperious corporation with more than a fleeting connection to the military.

Captured at the mall by ConSec security and brought to Dr. Ruth, Vale, the "derelict", the "piece of human junk" according to Ruth, is about to be reborn. In contrast to his homeless garb, Vale is now dressed in white from head to toe, the image of purity, a blank canvas. Because of his inability to focus his telepathic powers, Vale is driven senseless by the internal chatter of the people who are wordlessly ushered into a loft by Ruth. Convulsively fighting against the restraints that bind him to the bed, Vale looks like a junkie going cold turkey. Dr. Ruth injects him with Ephemerol. The very drug that made him a scanner is the thing he needs in order to keep the voices "without lips" under control. Drug references are prevalent throughout *Scanners* and are part of the 60s imagery that informs its narrative trajectory. When the artist Benjamin Pierce/Robert Silverman is introduced, his demeanor suggests he is a recreational drug user. Pierce is slouched in an armchair perched in the loft space of his barn-house studio. Doing nothing in particular, he barely moves and lazily slurs in response to Vale's entrance, "Why don't you leave me alone?" When Vale tells Pierce he needs his help, Pierce laughs maniacally, presumably at the absurdity that he—the slacker, the stoner, the hapless artist—would be capable of helping anybody with anything. It's not until Vale mentions Revok that Pierce is startled out of his chair and gives Vale a closer look. Much like the hookah-smoking Caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland*, Pierce asks, "Who are you?"—a question often asked of Vale directly or implicitly throughout the film. In addition to whatever drug references can be attached to the scene via allusions to popular culture, the question is yet another way in which Vale is framed as a figure, much like Alice, who is on a journey that will transform him from a child to adult. The use of Ephemerol is an important ingredient in that transformation. There are numerous close shots of hypodermic syringes ingesting and expelling liquid. After his encounter with Pierce, Vale heads back to his hotel and with an air of desperation picks up a package from the hotel clerk that contains Ephemerol. In the privacy of his room, Vale 'shoots up'. Within moments the sweats stop and the voices

without lips emanating through the walls are silenced, allowing Vale to sleep.

Previously, Ruth lies to Vale, telling him that scanners are a mysterious "freak of nature". Ruth takes no responsibility or credit for creating scanners through the Ephemerol campaign, a not too subtle reference to the Thalidomide and DES scandals. Ruth, no matter how benevolent he may seem, is ultimately portrayed as part of that generation that, due to ambition, self-interest, misguided priorities, and loss of idealism, are not to be trusted. During the interrogation scene near the end of the film, once again Dr. Ruth convincingly lies to Vale, and perhaps himself, by telling him that he has nothing to hide when in fact he hides what is most important: that Vale and Revok are brothers and that he, Ruth, is their father. What Vale does learn is that Ruth founded Biocarbon Amalgamate, the company that developed Ephemerol, and sold it to ConSec in 1942—the war years.

In addition to the Thalidomide/DES controversies, there is an implicit association made here between what Dr. Ruth has done

and the ethical dilemmas faced by the scientific community that gave birth to the Manhattan Project and more broadly, the military-industrial complex. "Do you know what that lab [Biocarbon Amalgamate] does?" asks Vale. "They make some sort of chemical weaponry among other things," Ruth says dismissively and without a trace of guilt or irony for what he has wrought. Once again Ruth takes no responsibility for his creations: chemical, biological or corporate. Ruth is able to work at ConSec because he has sold out—he has compromised his integrity and morality for a "genial working relationship" with his corporate sponsor. For Ruth's generation drugs are prescriptive: they are pharmaceuticals manufactured by corporations, dispensed by doctors, and used to cure, control and conquer, and as a byproduct, may be responsible for the creation of monstrosities or other forms of disability. For the scanner generation, drugs are represented as a source of self-control that leads to power. Ephemerol is a backfired form of control (a sedative for mom) that ultimately serves as a catalyst that leads

Michael Ironside as Darryl Revok, leader of the scanner underground





Kim Obrist/Jennifer O'Neill's outfit gives her the appearance of wearing a neck brace.

to transformation and eventually, transcendence.

If Ruth represents the generation allied with the military-industrial complex, the scanners are characterized as its privileged descendants who, feeling jaded and victimized by its goals, values and aspirations, reject the prevailing institutions by developing a counterculture and an armed resistance. In this way, the individual scanners have more of a connection with the Weather Underground or Students for a Democratic Society, than with a grown-up version of the children in *Village of the Damned* (1960). Like the scanner generation, the Weather Underground represents a threat from within (the children of the military-industrial complex) whose goal is to disrupt the status quo; whereas the children in *Village of the Damned* represent an external threat (the children of aliens) often allegorized as cold-war paranoia.

Responsible for both his sons' psychic disability/gift from which he has built a reputation and successful profession, Ruth is portrayed as a modern day Dr. Frankenstein. There are several exterior shots establishing his 'castle' as the deteriorating, abandoned commercial building where Vale is debriefed and trained. Sitting on the edge of his bed, still dressed in white, feet dangling inches from the floor, Vale looks like a fearful adolescent scared of taking on the responsibilities of adulthood. Ephemerol has enabled him to hear his own voice, making him feel exposed but liberating him from his previously wretched state. Vale is set up as a kind of missing link about to embark on a journey of self-discovery that will enable him to serve as a synthesis between the two existing scanner camps.

Big brother Darryl Revok's introduction is in sharp contrast to Vale's and also introduces an array of 'yuppie-culture' imagery that will follow. No derelict, Revok is a three-piece suit seated in ConSec's audience of financial and political VIPs. Using his scanning powers he has infiltrated ConSec's security with the sole purpose of assassinating ConSec's (Ruth's) last scanner who is portrayed as a flunky, a corporate tool. Revok has volunteered to be scanned by the flunky. In a sensational scene that has garnered much attention, Revok uses his scanning powers to detonate the head of the lackey scanner. ConSec security concludes that Revok is a scanner assassin and in a nicely constructed action sequence, several security men die trying to subdue Revok who escapes.

The attack, which happens early in the film, sets up the allegorical link of the scanner underground with the radical left. The attack was a 'blow against the empire', a direct and violent challenge to corporate authority. Following this debacle, there is a corporate reshuffling at ConSec and Braedon Keller/Lawrence Dane, who we later find out is working for Revok, is hired as the new head of security. Eight men, including Dr. Ruth, sit around a conference table as Keller unsuccessfully argues to kill ConSec's scanner program. In contrast to the conservatively dressed board of directors, the bearded, tieless Dr. Ruth, self-assuredly slouched in his chair, confidently argues that the program must be kept alive to fight the "scanner underground" that has decimated the ConSec program. Ruth proposes to send out Vale as a spy to infiltrate the underground and, using language that appeals to the CEO at the board meeting, "eliminate the competition". Ruth as

his stance and appearance implies, feels he is above the restraints imposed by the corporation. Like the bohemian artist Benjamin Pierce, the mad scientist has his own, often delusional, sense of autonomy from larger forces. In this regard the exterior establishing shots of Ruth's decrepit lab are an ironic counterpoint to the exterior shots of ConSec's unblemished corporate tower.

Meanwhile back at the decrepit lab, Dr. Ruth indoctrinates Vale by telling him the truth, but not the whole truth. Vale is shown a 16mm film of Revok, whom he does not yet know is his older brother, being interviewed at a mental institution in 1967. Revok has drilled a hole into the center of his forehead. In a disjointed fashion he describes the 'bad trip' logic of painting an eye on the patch that covers the wound. Identifying with the 16mm psychodrama he's just witnessed, Vale is profoundly disturbed. "That's me, isn't it?" Vale asks. The Revok film is an illustration of both ConSec's failure to keep the scanners under control, and the danger presented by the latter's rage (See Figure 5). In *Artist as the Monster*, William Beard suggests the 16mm film may be a reference to Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) because the father has access to and may have filmed the son's 'treatment'. The black and white footage of the institutionalized Revok is also reminiscent of Fred Wiseman's 1967 *Titicut Follies*, a disquieting documentary about a Massachusetts asylum for the criminally insane. The film is a portrait of men who live outside the realm of the normal, and the doctors and security guards that try to keep them under control. The Revok film also evokes the glut of wild footage easily accessible on the internet, that documents the use of LSD, THC and other mind altering drugs used by the US, Canadian, and other governments to experiment on soldiers for nefarious purposes, including its use as a potential weapon. All these allusions are perfectly in keeping with the conspiratorial intrigue that is part of the narrative scope of *Scanners*.

An asylum for the criminally insane is mentioned again when the scanner-artist Benjamin Pierce is first introduced. Pierce, who at age ten tried to kill his family, was eventually "[rehabilitated] through art" and released. Dr. Ruth wants Vale to get information from Pierce about Revok's radical underground. The idea of the artist living in his head is literalized during Vale's visit to the artist's secluded rural studio. Pierce and Vale talk inside a huge sculptured head created by the artist while four of Revok's assassins approach. Vale, trying to fulfill the mission he was set out to do by Dr. Ruth is also in search of, or trying to create, his own identity. He tells Pierce "I'm one of you". Pierce doesn't understand or care what Vale means and avoids him by exiting the sculptured head where he is gunned-down by Revok's soldiers.

The arrival of Revok's assassins uses iconography steeped in the zeitgeist of radical 60s groups. The four denim clad assassins, one white female, one black male and two white males, pile out of a black van, toting weapons. As they are blasting away at Pierce, whom they are apparently trying to silence to prevent Vale from getting access to Revok, they look like (wanted) poster-children for the Symbionese Liberation Army. The FBI bank holdup images of Patty Hearst and Donald DeFreeze appear to be either deliberate or unconscious models for Cronenberg's scanner underground soldiers. From the safety of Pierce's sculptured head, Vale demonstrates scanner prowess by telepathically incapacitating the assassins. Too late to save Pierce, Vale exits the smashed sculptured metaphorical head and uses his scanning powers to telepathically enter Pierce's actual head to retrieve his dying thoughts—a modern twist on

the trope of a character's dying words leading to the next plot point. Vale's scan leads him to Kim Obrist, the leader of the other scanner camp.

Prior to this scene we have already witnessed Vale's scanning prowess in a sequence that explores another popular 60s icon: the yogi master. Dr. Ruth matches yogi master Dieter Tauntz/Fred Doederlein to serve as Vale's "psychic sparring partner". Tauntz is supposed to be able to control his heart rate and alpha wave rhythm. Vale enters the scene like a boxer entering the ring in a fight movie. Ruth, playing the part of the coach, removes Vale's coat as if it were a boxer's satin robe. Still wearing white, Vale sits opposite his opponent who is sitting in the lotus position. Barefooted, crossed legs, eyes closed, the yogi is a portrait of self-control. Tauntz (taunts!) is unable to control anything. He shutters, shakes, whimpers, and then begs for Vale to stop his scan. Trying to prevent a homicide, Ruth is ready to inject Vale with Ephemerol when Vale rises to his feet and prevents Ruth's intervention. Vale looks down at his father graphically and metaphorically. In a display of rebellion and power, Vale, the enfant terrible, has rendered the yogi master impotent while demonstrating complete control through self-restraint at just the right moment. The father no longer has control of the son—either of them.

Led to Kim Obrist's group of 'new age' scanners by the dying Ben Pierce, Vale is introduced to a sect of scanners that Dr. Ruth never told him about. Obrist's headquarters is an urban building with lots of homey, modest rooms—the type of space that was not uncommon during the 70s that housed meeting places for practitioners of Transcendental Meditation and other consciousness raising groups. Vale is greeted by a fellow thirty-something who closes his eyes, raises his right hand, and scans him. At one point during his scan he opens his eyes and flashes a brief smile that suggests a mix of incredulity, restrained respect, and amusement at Vale's naiveté. This sequence is an example of how Cronenberg has elicited nuanced performances throughout the film, from even marginal characters. Vale is led to the room where he meets Obrist for the first time. "He's for real" is how he is introduced to Obrist. She is kneeling before a couch, her back to the camera, while she comforts a man who is clearly in emotional distress. As she turns to face Vale, the high turtle-neck sweater wrapped in a scarf—an outfit she wears for the rest of the movie—gives her the appearance of a person wearing a neck brace. In the final scene of the movie Revok describes her and the group she leads as "Obrist and her band of cripples". Revok is depicted as a monster with muscle; Obrist and her group are represented as enlightened but, like the yogi master, completely impotent.

Vale participates in a group scan. Unlike the previous depictions of being scanned—which caused nausea, nosebleeds and of course the infamous exploding head—this group-scan is portrayed as pro-social, interactive, and personal. Sitting in a circle on the floor they commune with each other using the voices without lips. During an audio montage that includes phrases like, "scan together and our minds begin to flow into each other.... beautiful and frightening.... frightening to lose yourself, to lose yourself to the group self, to lose your will to the group will," the camera circles around the group, image dissolving from participant to participant, suggesting their connectedness. Presumably this camp controls their disability/gift through "group scans" not drugs. Here, scanning is a method of expanding consciousness as opposed to consolidating power.



Scanner synthesis: Cameron Vale loses his body but wins the scanner war.

Two of Revok's soldiers carrying weapons concealed in guitar cases, force their way into the room and blast away at the oblivious revelers. Several are killed before they awake from the group meditation and set the assassins aflame. Five of Obrist's band, including Vale, flee the building and drive away in a beat-up yellow van with the words "SCHOOL BUS" faded away on its hood. By putting the scanner occupants into a school bus, we are being prompted to view this sect of spiritually connected scanners as vulnerable innocents, school children that in the face of Revok's aggressive tactics have as much chance as Dieter Tauntz had against Vale. In contrast to the yellow school bus, the black van filled with Revok soldiers is ominous. It pulls alongside the other vehicle; louver windows open revealing weapons that fire on the occupants of the school bus. The out-of-control school bus smashes into a record store, another icon of youthful innocence and impotent rebellion, shattering glass and demolishing racks of vinyl LPs.

Surrounded by smashed records, posters of pop stars, and an RSO logo that spontaneously combusts,⁷ Vale and Obrist escape to the basement of the record store with one of Revok's soldiers in pursuit. Obrist believes the battle between the two scanner camps is over and declares Revok the winner, "We were the dream, and he's the nightmare." When Vale suggests that he and Obrist can "destroy Revok together", Obrist mocks the newbie: "You? You're barely human." Head bowed in shame, Vale reacts like a little boy who's been rejected by a parent. Hurt and forlorn by the cutting comment, the unaffiliated scanner with only a marginal connection to ConSec, via Dr. Ruth, is viewed as incredibly naïve and lacking a meaningful identity. In spite of his seeming shortcomings, Vale subdues the scanner assassin who presents him with a liquid-filled medical vial emblazoned with the Biocarbon Amalgamate logo, which leads us to the next plot point. With the introduction of Obrist's group, the status quo represented by ConSec and its allegorical equivalent (the military-industrial complex) is rejected by Vale (intergenerational conflict), and an allegorical connection is made between the divisive dissension, infighting and betrayal within the ranks of the scanners with that of the new left (intra-generational conflict).

At this point in the film, allusions to the 60s/70s radical and mind/body/spirit counterculture are replaced with suggestions of 'yuppie culture'. Revok the revolutionary becomes Revok the yuppie. Revok is portrayed as a usurper. He is not being hand-

ed the proverbial baton by the older generation whose corporate culture he will adopt. Revok and his group snatch power through a coup d'état. They take control of all that has already been put in place by ConSec, including their computer program. Vale infiltrates Biocarbon Amalgamate where the sterile corporate environment is literalized. Workers at Biocarbon wear HAZMAT suits not to prevent themselves from being contaminated, but to prevent themselves from contaminating the production of Ephemerol that is being mass-produced and shipped out in huge hygienic stainless steel truck tankers. Surrounded by workers and middle management toddlers, Revok is clearly in charge.

When first trying to connect with Revok though Benjamin Pierce earlier in the movie, Vale visits an art gallery where Pierce's work is on display and the milieu of the young urban professional is introduced into the narrative. "I'm interested in buying this piece for my apartment in Paris," says Vale. No longer dressed in the garb of the homeless, or the pristine white of the recovering addict, Vale is dressed in suit and tie and wears a thick gold bracelet for the wine and cheese event. Obrist, in black formalwear, sports a sequined choker in anticipation of the turtleneck 'brace' that will follow. When Vale finally does meet Obrist in person at the safe house, he's dressed in fashionable working class plaid and denim. In this way, wardrobe plays an important role in how the viewer may interpret the alliance, or association of the various characters.

A series of deceptions and plotline contortions drive the story to the film's conclusion: pregnant women are, once again, being treated with Ephemerol and are about to give birth to a new generation of scanners that Revok will presumably command. With the help and encouragement of Dr. Ruth, who is partially redeemed by his actions just before Keller murders him as per Revok's instructions, Vale immobilizes ConSec by using a phone connection and his scanning powers to hack into and destroy ConSec's computers along with its data. *Scanners* was released at that point in time when personal computers were just making their appearance and here they are already being hacked into on a massive scale. The military-industrial complex may have developed the computer, but it belongs to the generation of scanners.

Revok incapacitates Vale and Obrist and takes them to his prototypical yuppie office at Biocarbon where the final showdown will take place. The office is spacious with tiled floors,

leather chairs, a credenza, overstuffed couches, a desk with marblesque blotter and pen holder, the corporate logo is mounted on brick-face and white paneled walls. There are lots of plants and various *objets d'art*, one of which is used as the opening salvo in the war between the brothers. Shirtsleeves rolled, tie loosened, vest undone, Revok is drinking what looks like a scotch on ice; think Jerry Rubin, the post-Youth International Party stockbroker. In this final sequence all is revealed to Vale and the viewer: the family relationships, Ruth's role in creating scanners, and Revok's efforts to recruit his "kid brother" to the cause of building "an empire so brilliant, so glorious, we'll be the envy of the whole planet". Before long it becomes clear that the brothers are never going to align forces and the ensuing good vs. evil battle follows.

At the end of the brothers' very bloody scanner fight, Kim Obrist awakes from an adjoining room. Entering the main office she finds a body—not unlike one of Benjamin Pierce's creations—lying burnt beyond recognition on the floor, its arms spread as in a crucifixion stance. Knowledge has transformed Cameron Vale from a confused, transformational Alice—like figure to an enlightened Christ-like figure. The scanner battle has forced the brothers to transcend the body by destroying the body—at least one of them. Kim senses Cameron's presence, and then hears his voice coming from Revok who is curled up in a corner. "It's me Kim. Cameron. I'm here. We've won." The final shot is an extreme close up of Revok's face 'wearing' Vale's stark blue eyes. The scar on Revok's forehead is gone. A synthesis between the brothers and presumably between the two scanner camps has occurred.

In summary, Cronenberg has used a vast array of iconic imagery throughout *Scanners* to create an allegorical psychodrama placing representations of broad political, social, economic and cultural forces in conflict with each other. The allegorical message of the film is that the violence of a radical underground (Revok's group), the passive naiveté of an isolated, disengaged counterculture (Obrist's group) and the status quo of the imperious corporation (ConSec) are all rejected in favor of some undefined synthesis of the three. What the end result of that synthesis is we'll never know. The allegory embedded in *Scanners* does not predict outcomes; it explores contemporary relationships. This is why, like many of Cronenberg's films, *Scanners* ends with a strong sense of narrative closure that is paradoxically equal to its open-ended ambiguity.

While many of Cronenberg's films may be described as fanciful and fantastic, the stories are always based on attributes connected to the real world and so can easily be seen as allegories, parables, or other types of cautionary tales that are sometimes seen as prescient. Some have commented on how *Shivers* and *Rabid* anticipated AIDS, or at least allegorized sexually transmitted diseases. The explanation of the surgical procedure that forms the premise of *Rabid* may have sounded like total gibberish in 1976 when the film was made, but today, its connection to stem cell research, a procedure that was a decade or two away from being actualized, is an easy one to make. On the commentary track of the *Rabid* DVD, Cronenberg talks about how the artist has antennae "that pick up signals that other people either suppress or are not aware of... It's not exactly prophecy but it is a kind of sensitivity [that the artist has] about the way things are going socially and biologically and environmentally and so on".⁸

Whether the baby-boomer psychodrama that plays out in *Scanners* was conscious or not, it immediately comes to the

foreground with each viewing of the movie. It has often been noted that because of a variety of production issues, Cronenberg was writing the script for *Scanners* while the movie was being shot. While the rushed production schedule may have caused some narrative hiccups, perhaps it also allowed for an unfiltered flow of zeitgeist to the artist's "antennae", especially as it relates to the development of his own career as reflected through the character of Cameron Vale. Elsewhere on the commentary track, Cronenberg ruminates about his identification with his characters—in this case the Marilyn Chambers character—who are outsiders: "People who by circumstances are forced to become outsiders, not necessarily by nature but by circumstances beyond their control, in some ways it's always been to me the archetype of the artist who becomes a kind of creature, becomes a monster, becomes an outsider because of his perceptions, because of what he feels driven to do by his art."⁹

The journey of Vale the outsider is very much a deliberation on how Cronenberg, the outsider, with an affinity for independent underground cinema, hailed and vilified as the King of Venereal Horror, will adapt to the pressure to conform to the demands of an industry that pays handsomely for a large audience and punishes decisively for an empty theater. Alternating between films with subject matter that have niche appeal (*Naked Lunch* [1991], *Crash* [1996], *Spider* [2002]) and a mass, or at least a broader market (*The Fly* [1986], *History of Violence* [2005]), seems to be how Cronenberg, like many filmmakers, navigates the dichotomy of cinema as art (counterculture) and cinema as industry (dominant culture). But thirty plus years after the release of *Scanners*, Cronenberg still seems to be making the movies he wants to make. By this measure, the Vale/Revok amalgam curled up in the corner asserting, "We've won," may be a mirrored image of Cronenberg holding onto his cake while getting to eat it too.

Notes

- 1 Michael Grant, ed., *The Modern Fantastic: The Films of David Cronenberg* (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 37-39.
- 2 Piers Handling, ed., *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg* (New York: Zoetrope, 1983), 31, 39.
- 3 Serge Grünberg, *David Cronenberg: Interviews With Serge Grünberg* (London: Plexus, 2006), 14.
- 4 Grant, *The Modern Fantastic*, 22.
- 5 Grünberg, *David Cronenberg*, 15.
- 6 William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 112.
- 7 Cronenberg seems to take pleasure in having the assassin stand before a three dimensional RSO mascot as it bursts into flames. RSO (the Robert Stigwood Organization) was a highly successful independent record label that ventured into film production finding wild success with *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Grease* (1978), and followed up with the abysmal failure of the indescribably awful *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1978). According to *The Internet Movie Database* (www.imdb.com/title/tt0081455/trivia), RSO paid for product placement in *Scanners* and then went out of business. Setting the RSO logo up in flames is a good example of Cronenberg's wry, often unappreciated sense of humor.
- 8 *Rabid*, DVD, Directed by David Cronenberg. (1977; Toronto, Canada: Somerville House) 2004.
- 9 Ibid.

Sex, Science, and the 'Female Monstrous'

WOOD CONTRA CRONENBERG, REVISITED



The Brood

By ALLAN MACINNIS

For admirers of the films of David Cronenberg, the charges levied against Cronenberg's cinema by critic Robin Wood in the 1970s and 1980s remain provocative years after the fact. In the 1979 pamphlet *The American Nightmare* and in 1983's "Cronenberg: A Dissenting View" in *The Shape of Rage*, Wood makes a compelling case for regarding Cronenberg as a reactionary, based primarily on his first three above-ground features: *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), and *The Brood* (1979). Wood describes *Shivers* as being "premised on and motivated by sexual disgust;" and *Rabid* and *The Brood* as showing that, for Cronenberg, the "ultimate dread... is of woman usurping the active, aggressive role that patriarchal identity assigns to the male,"¹ something which leads to horrifying repercussions. Since these three films, the main focus of Wood's attack, deal with scientists whose attempts to benefit humanity go dreadfully awry, Wood further concludes that "Cronenberg's movies tell us that we shouldn't want to change society because we would

make it even worse."² While one may be left with a sense that Wood is overlooking certain aspects of these films, it is equally undeniable that some of his criticisms stick. As Cronenberg has himself responded to these criticisms, and Wood in turn has offered rebuttals, the opportunity presents itself to weigh both sides' arguments against a close viewing of these three early features, to see which of Wood's claims have the strongest impact, and which show instead the perils of being too reductive in pursuit of a politicized criticism. Of particular interest for this paper will be to see if a "left-wing case" for Cronenberg's films may be constructed, such that Wood himself suggests might be made, but by someone other than himself.³

Attitudes Towards Science

It is useful to begin with a consideration of the role of science in Cronenberg's early features. Both Wood and Cronenberg's supporters, such as William Beard, at times echo the same argument, that attempts to improve society in these films will only make it worse. Wood offers a précis of *Shivers*, *Rabid* and *The Brood* that highlights this implication:

A man of science invents something (an aphrodisiac, a new technique of skin grafting, a new method of psychotherapy that he believes will benefit mankind and promote social progress (in *Shivers* and *The Brood*, explicitly a form of liberation); he uses a woman as the (chief or sole) guinea pig for his experiments; the results are unpredictably catastrophic, escalate way beyond his control, and eventually produce a kind of mini-apocalypse.⁴

Using similar terms, Beard writes of how, in Cronenberg's universe, "catastrophe arises from the rational attempt to improve the human animal:"

Although Cronenberg denies any animus towards or even criticism of science is to be found in his films... the parasitology in *Shivers*, the plastic surgery in *Rabid*, [and] the physiological psychology in *The Brood*... all have unpleasant results ranging from the personally destructive to the socially cataclysmic.⁵

Alternate readings of Cronenberg's relationships to science are, however, possible. One would be to consider the downfall of Cronenberg's scientists as *tragic*—a comment not on the folly of science but on the inevitability of human decline and death, made more poignant in the face of the aspirations of science. Cronenberg has stated that he feels "empathy for doctors and scientists," and takes them as his "persona" in his films.⁶ He argues that, in a way, "everybody's a mad scientist, and life is their lab. We're all trying to experiment to find a way to live, to solve problems... those characters really represent people in general, who somehow have to figure out what they're doing, what their worth means, what their relationship to society is, how to use their creative energy and how to deal with their destructive energy."⁷ That our attempts to make sense of our circumstances and improve our lot ultimately end in death is frequently seen as one of Cronenberg's core themes,⁸ a theme best exemplified, however, by Cronenberg's later work, especially *The Fly* (1986) and *Dead Ringers* (1988). Wood cannot be blamed for saying, in 1983, that "the films lack any sense of the



tragic,"⁹ since that quality (with some exceptions for Rose/Marilyn Chambers in *Rabid*, for which Wood allows) is not strongly emphasized in the early features.

Another strategy would be to argue that the scientists in Cronenberg's early films are not necessarily engaged in progressive endeavours, and that to assign such a reading to their actions from the outset both oversimplifies matters and skews the argument. This is perhaps easiest to demonstrate in the case of Emil Hobbes/Fred Doederlein in *Shivers*, who is first presented as an anonymous murderer and sex criminal, and whose scientific project, when we discover it, seems both anti-social and crazy. We are further informed that he has previously gotten in trouble for his sexual advances on a young female patient, which may play a role in his schemes, particularly since it is this same patient he is now experimenting on. Rollo Linsky/Joe Silver, in trying to discover, after Hobbes' death, what he was up to, summarizes his findings on the phone to Roger St. Luc/Paul Hampton, quoting from Hobbes' private papers:

Hobbes believed that "man is an animal that thinks too much—an over-rational animal that has lost touch with its body and its instincts"... in other words, too much brain and not enough guts. So what he came up with to help our guts along was a parasite that's, here, a combination of an aphrodisiac and venereal disease that will hopefully turn the world into one beautiful mindless orgy.

Wood shows some confusion as to why Hobbes has "seen fit... to include a VD component in his aphrodisiac parasite," saying it is for "reasons never made clear,"¹⁰ yet the implication seems clear enough. Hobbes so values his personal fantasy over the general good that he is willing to sacrifice the latter for the former, hoping his parasites will spread, as indeed they do. He is someone who has rushed to embrace a sort of revolution driven by his own personal agendas, without thinking through the consequences for others—at least until it is too late, as his last minute reversal in the murder of Annabelle/Cathy Graham suggests; he is what Cronenberg describes as a revolutionary "poseur", someone who is "driven primarily by private anguish rather than social vision."¹¹ Far from being a figure of social progress, Hobbes is a questionable figure from the outset, a "mad scientist" whose political program for the rest of the world should be viewed with skepticism.¹²

At least some aspects of Hobbes' character are mirrored by Dr. Hal Raglan/Oliver Reed in *The Brood*. Like Hobbes, Raglan appears to place private interest over public good. His controversial therapeutic technique, Psychoplasms, involves producing physical manifestations of emotional trauma, and has caused one of his female patients, Nola/Samantha Eggar, to give birth by unnatural means to a brood of half-human children who enact her rage. Raglan's decision to conceal this horrific side-effect and continue treating Nola raises several ethical questions, and he has been compared, in criticism, to the charismatic, self-serving, and authoritarian leader of a cult.¹³ When Carveth/Art Hindle says ringingly at one point that he doesn't trust Raglan, this is clearly a valuation audiences are

Shivers

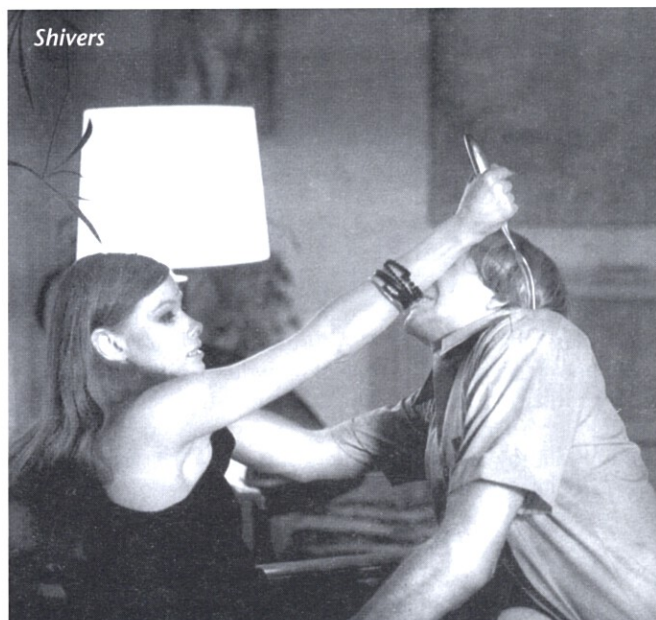
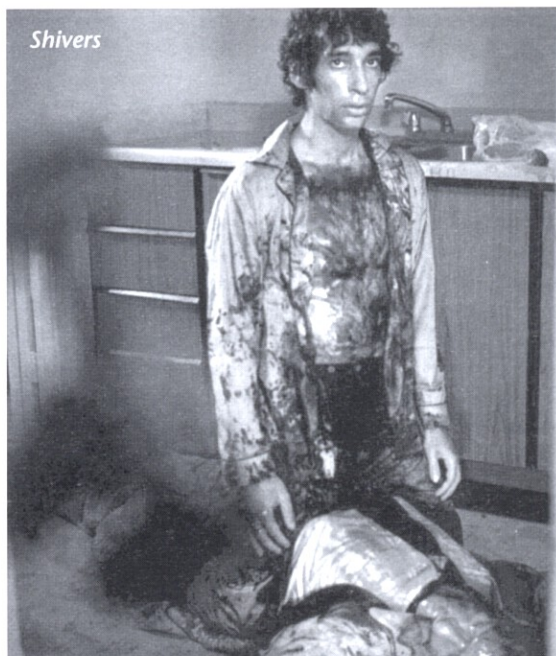


meant to share. Cronenberg's mistrust of such a figure of male authority is hardly without progressive political import, enough so that it is curious that Wood neglects to mention it. Wood argues that in the world of *The Brood*, "patriarchal dominance is 'natural'" and that "any deviation from it will result in disaster,"¹⁴ yet Raglan, problematic as he is, is surely the most charismatic father figure in the film. He is identified as such ("Daddy") in the opening therapeutic demonstration, and is arguably even the "father" of the brood, having usurped Frank's role *vis-à-vis* Nola. It seems more plausible to read Raglan as figuring Cronenberg's mistrust of arrogant, self-serving male authority than as representing progressive political endeavour.

Unquestionably, however, some of the science in Cronenberg's films is well-intended, as the example of Dr. Dan Keloid/Howard Ryshpan in *Rabid* demonstrates. In contrast with both Raglan and Hobbes, up until the time when he becomes infected, Keloid appears conscientious and well-meaning. Keloid does use an experimental technique to save Rose, which proves to have disastrous results, but he does so with the best of intentions; we are told that only by operating on Rose using his skin-grafting technique does he have any hope of saving her. It might be mentioned that the plastic surgery clinic named after Keloid is privately-owned and a for-profit endeavour, that Keloid will doubtless stand to profit from his technique if it proves successful in saving a life, and that he may not be wholly ungrateful for a test subject; but if we generously assume that all this is irrelevant—that Keloid really only has Rose's interests (and the betterment of humanity) at heart—we have here the strongest case yet for Wood's interpretation of Cronenberg's attitude towards science and social progress. If Cronenberg is not setting out to demonstrate in *Rabid* that a scientist's well-intentioned attempts to do good lead to chaos, what should we make of Keloid's role in the narrative? The director's commentary track for the 2004 DVD release offers some interesting suggestions, which require some elaboration to clarify.

In the *Rabid* commentary, Cronenberg frequently underscores instances where his characters fail to understand what is happening around them and/or underestimate their own vulnerability. This happens first when we see Hart/Frank Moore sitting in the ambulance, as Rose is wheeled into the clinic: Cronenberg observes that we here see "our hero trying to comprehend what's been set in motion, which of course he cannot." When Rose, transformed by her surgery into a sort of vampire only able to feed on human blood, flees the clinic, an encounter with a truck driver shows her, according to the director, "feeling kind of confident and thinking maybe somehow she could be a normal girl" by accepting an offered sandwich. Her subsequent fit of vomiting shows that, just like Hart, she has failed to understand her situation. Cronenberg seems positively amused at the situation of one of Rose's potential victims, during the shopping mall pick-up, saying "here's a guy trying to be really cool and thinking he's really scoring bigtime... Of course, he doesn't really know what he's getting into."¹⁵ The director repeatedly underscores in his commentary the failure to understand the implications of a turn of events and the limits on a character's knowledge. Though he doesn't remark on it, the mechanisms of Rose's ultimate death also result from her failure to understand the realities at stake.

This tendency—to emphasize his characters' failures to understand the implications of an event—becomes particularly



significant when Cronenberg turns to Keloid. He frames Keloid's failure to understand what he has done in terms of the vice of *hubris*, of relevance also to Raglan's prideful manner and the apparent self-serving wish-fulfillment of Hobbes' fantasies. When Keloid comforts Rose after she regains consciousness, Cronenberg remarks—using language similar to that seen above—that we are seeing a "classic sci-fi case of a doctor or scientist thinking that he's on top of things and not really at all being aware... of what he's set in motion. And he's about to pay for that." This latter remark, offered with some trace of satisfaction, suggests that in Cronenberg's view Keloid deserves what happens to him, for having too blithely tinkered with nature. This is borne out later in the film. As we see Keloid foaming at the mouth and raving inside a police van, Cronenberg observes: "this is a particularly pleasing sequence, of course, because you now have the confident authority figure who has really screwed everything up showing himself now as

depraved and corrupted and destroyed—basically, a victim of his own cleverness.”¹⁶ If we accept with Beard that in Cronenberg’s films “science... must stand as a representation of human reason in general,”¹⁷ what we have in such statements is an argument not for abandoning attempts to improve society, but for maintaining at all costs a *humility towards nature*, being wary of the limits and pitfalls of reason and regarding with skepticism science’s too-eager attempts to tinker with human biology.

All of this, unremarked upon by Wood, has potentially politically progressive implications, including, though they are never explicitly developed in Cronenberg’s cinema, environmentalist ones.¹⁸ Anxieties about humans tampering with the environment and biology to disastrous effect have been a staple of science fiction and horror cinema since the time of *Frankenstein* (1931); indeed, Cronenberg himself was once considered as a potential director for a *Frankenstein* remake.¹⁹ Given such considerations, Wood seems too hasty in dismissing the defense offered by one of Cronenberg’s early supporters, John Harkness, that Cronenberg’s films are “about science.”²⁰

It is not just that science is shown going awry in *Shivers*, *Rabid*, and *The Brood* that Wood finds objectionable, however, but that the scientists in each case perform their procedures on female subjects. To some extent, this actually serves to lessen the fault of Cronenberg’s women, because what is Annabelle’s promiscuity compared to Hobbes’s insane experiments or his brutal murder of her? But as Wood acknowledges, this is also an aspect of Cronenberg’s project that changes over time, making his films “less actively objectionable.”²¹ Referring to *Scanners* and *Videodrome*, Wood writes that Cronenberg’s post-*Brood* works “introduce two important modifications...: the chief experimentee/ victim is no longer a woman, and the form of science involved, the ambition of the scientist, has far less progressive connotations, so that the ‘awful warning’ the films offer is less unacceptable.”²² A further observation that Wood could not make, given the time of his writing, is that increasingly through his career, the degeneration witnessed in Cronenberg’s films takes place not in society in general but within the body of the male scientist himself (*The Fly* and *Dead Ringers* being the paramount examples). Sometimes this happens in reaction to the female, but it is never her fault. This can be read as an attempt on the director’s part to “own” whatever neurosis about the female is unveiled in *Rabid* and *The Brood*. It is also worth mentioning in this regard that, perhaps in part due to the criticisms Cronenberg received for his depiction of Nola by critics including Wood, monstrous women are almost entirely absent from Cronenberg’s cinema after *The Brood*, with women either taking on the role of healthy, normal bystander, equal participant, innocent object of unhealthy male fixations, or, as in 2007’s *Eastern Promises*, outright heroine.

Cronenberg, Sex and Women

Wood’s consideration of *Shivers* as a reactionary film in *The American Nightmare* revolves almost entirely around the film’s depiction of sex. Wood writes that “*Shivers* is a film single-mindedly about sexual liberation, a prospect it views with unmitigated horror... [It] systematically chronicles the breaking of every sexual-social taboo—promiscuity, lesbianism, homosexuality, age difference, finally incest—but each step is presented as merely one more addition to the accumulation of horrors.” In particular, “sexually aroused preying women are presented with a particular intensity of horror and disgust.”²³

There is an element of the subjective in this. “Disgust” is a strong word, and while some elements of *Shivers* might seem disgusting—the phallic/excremental parasites, the lump traveling down Janine/Susan Petrie’s throat—others, like the glamorous/sexualized representation of cult star (and former soft-core actress) Lynne Lowry as Nurse Forsyth, seem anything but, appearing instead to be intended to titillate a fanboy audience. While such titillations—like the suspense that accompanies the “bathtub attack” on Betts/Barbara Steele, as we wait for a parasite to crawl its way into her vagina, or the winking play on porno tropes that sets up the film’s lesbian seduction and kiss—may be juvenile, pandering to an unenlightened heterosexual male viewership, and/or politically problematic, they also contain elements of humour and irony for genre-savvy filmgoers, and arguably even insert moments of beauty and pleasure into their ugliness—as when Betts, initially seen writhing in pain in her bath, is shown briefly in apparent post-orgasmic ecstasy. While it is unfortunate that both Cronenberg and Harkness make an issue of Wood being gay-identified in their rebuttals in *The Shape of Rage*—a rather pointless counterattack, since none of Wood’s arguments depend on a queer reading of Cronenberg’s cinema—it is possible that issues of sexual orientation are in fact relevant here; that Wood, as a gay viewer, is simply misunderstanding some of the (however dubious) pleasures of these films. While unquestionably sex is important to all three of the Cronenberg features that Wood criticizes, “sexual ambivalence” (a term Cronenberg himself employs in *Naked Lunch*) seems more appropriate to a description of *Shivers* and *Rabid* than “sexual disgust;” the relationship of the director to sex seems more one of “attraction/repulsion” than the “unmitigated horror” that Wood describes.²⁴

This ambivalence is nowhere better expressed in *Shivers* than during the scene where Nurse Forsyth offers a defense of the film’s sexual revolution. Her speech (“all flesh is erotic flesh”) seems designed to persuade the audience that some of what they have been receiving as horrifying needs to be reevaluated, and is quite convincing, at least until the bug starts coming out of her mouth. There is comedy in the scene where St. Luc hits and gags her, which seems to fly below Wood’s radar: on the one hand, St. Luc is trying to keep the parasite from attacking him, but on the other, he could be read as being threatened by her vision of a sexualized, polymorphously perverse society. The scene is arguably a potent, and feminist-friendly, image of the “gagging” of a female, previously seen with Annabelle, but here made to look neurotic and a bit silly—an index of how much St. Luc (but not the director or audience, who presumably, Wood excepted, “get the joke”) is threatened by liberated sexuality. When Forsyth finally turns on St. Luc in the pool, however intimidating she may be, she is presented at her sexiest, and as Cronenberg has noted, viscerally and emotionally, the audience wants the kiss to happen, is on her side.²⁵

Most notably absent from Wood’s critique of *Shivers* is an acknowledgement that the real butt of the film’s comedy lies in the character of St. Luc, who functions as a “straight man” to the film’s subversions of social norms. As with Hobbes, Raglan, and Keloid, Wood apparently misses aspects of *Shivers* that critique the male protagonist’s character. He is yet another man of science who presumes to rise above nature. His disinterested observation of Forsyth’s striptease—as the director says, “he’s a saint, don’t forget”²⁶—occurs while Linsky speaks on the phone about man being an “over-rational animal”. This is clearly meant to apply to St. Luc, whose ordeal in the subsequent

film will amply address this flaw. As the man charged (along with Linsky) by Hobbes with solving the problem Hobbes has set in motion, St. Luc can even be viewed as Hobbes' representative and heir, paying for Hobbes' crimes. The ending of *Shivers* answers the violence we see when Hobbes murders Annabelle, and restores a sort of justice to the universe, by having a female, previously the victim of the male, turn the tables and assume the powerful position. As Beard writes, "in that final horrifying/ecstatic climax, [St. Luc] is in some respect getting a richly deserved come-uppance."²⁷

Shivers can thus be to some extent cleared of the charges leveled against it by Wood, but this is less easy to do in the case of *Rabid*. Beyond any doubt, Rose in *Rabid* depicts an "active, aggressive female sexuality", the release of which precipitates a social breakdown in the form of disease her armpit penis "bite" carries. Where Wood again oversimplifies matters, and appears to misunderstand Cronenberg, is in his claim that this "released female activeness" is "dramatized as horrific and disgusting;"²⁸ in fact, it is dramatized as sexy and sympathetic, and containing elements of retributive justice, all of which complicates matters considerably.

Cronenberg himself speaks to charges of misogyny on his *Rabid* commentary: "Yes, she becomes a monster, but in the genre, when you become a monster, this is not a criticism, anymore than the Jeff Goldblum character in *The Fly* could be said to be misanthropic, because I turned a man into a monster as opposed to a woman."²⁹ The parallels between Seth Brundle and Rose—both of whom are changed by science, grapple with their condition, and end up tragically dead—are sufficient that the analogy bears exploration. For one thing, Brundle's character in *The Fly* clearly connects to a commentary on masculinity, particularly on masculine sexuality, since his degeneration is presented as an aspect of a sexual trajectory he is placed on from the film's outset, with plot points revolving around his lack of sexual experience, his jealousy, his desire to father a child, and so forth. Brundle is *not* ultimately regarded as a misandric representation of masculinity, since the film is full of pathos and sympathy for him, but much of the film's richness lies in its portrait of the pitfalls of male psycho-sexuality.

So if Brundle speaks to "man", does Rose speak to "woman?" If so, what kind of portrait of woman do we have? Rose is impulsive (she "feeds" without thinking or understanding); she is given to expressive emotional displays (she is frequently shown screaming or writhing); her survival becomes dependent on her ability to manipulate men with her looks (attracting predators for her to prey on); she seems heedless of the consequences of her actions (she denies being responsible for the "plague", seems barely aware it is going on); and is inclined to defer blame for it onto the men around her. Finally, when Rose begins to feel doubt about herself, she puts herself to the test in a way that is poorly thought-out and leads to her death. These characteristics seem easily connected to



Rabid



Rabid

The Brood



a reading of the female character, but not a positive one.

Contrasts between Rose and Brundle are also instructive here. Unlike Rose, who takes several victims and starts a plague that kills hundreds, the only man Brundle harms is Stathis Borans/John Getz, who has come to Brundle's workspace prepared to kill him. Brundle preys on no one, and his "crimes" such as they are—attempting to fuse with Veronica/Geena Davis and the unborn baby Brundle—are mitigated in a way that Rose's crimes are not. The film explains at least some of Brundle's transformations in the "insect politics" monologue, which prepares us for his changing into something psychologically, as well as physically, less than human. No such explanation is given for Rose; once she grows her "vampire armpit penis" as a result of her plastic surgery, she seems to have no compunction whatsoever about using it to suck blood, taking her first victim almost as soon as she awakens. It is true, as Cronenberg mentions in the commentary, that her vampiric condition is not caused by her and is not an aspect of her nature, but her feeding is presented as no less instinctual, as if her armpit penis has formed along with all the knowledge she needs to use it correctly. To some extent, her monstrosity is mitigated by her attempts to find an ethical approach to feeding, as when she attempts to satiate herself with cow's blood, but some of the victims she takes, such as the hot tub girl, are fed upon and/or killed without any hint of conscience, out of sheer predatory lust. If Brundle did such things from the outset of his transformation, given the extent to which the film frames itself as being "about" masculinity, he could indeed be taken for a monstrous representation of a man.

So far, Wood's criticisms of *Rabid* hold up rather well, but there are mitigating and complicating elements. There are satisfying, quasi-feministic, and at least arguably progressive aspects of Rose's predation that must be noted, which may at

least partially vindicate Cronenberg's claim that she is a "heroine and not a monster."³⁰ Having been changed by her surgery, she adapts by seeking out or taking advantage of situations where men might prey on her. Three of her victims (the farmer who attempts to rape her, the porno theatre pickup, and the kid at the mall) are overt predators; while two others, Lloyd/Roger Periard and the truck driver, Smooth Eddy/Gary McKeehan, are framed in situations where a woman might normally be seen as disempowered or the potential victim of a sexual assault. Lloyd does no wrong, but Cronenberg inserts a scene in which a nurse, interpreting the "crime scene" left by Rose's attack, comments that "he tried to molest her while she was still in a coma"—a mistaken interpretation of what happened, but one which still shows Cronenberg sympathizing with the female as potential victim, and which emphasizes Rose's newfound empowerment as a woman in situations where women are typically vulnerable. Similarly, when Rose is picked up by the truck driver, we cannot but think of the perils of a single attractive woman hitchhiking; her feeding on him is again an instance of Cronenberg "turning the tables" in a power relationship. Carol J. Clover, in *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, finds it remarkable that at the end of various slasher films, male audiences are brought into identification with and sympathy for the "Final Girl" in her battle against what is usually a monstrous masculine figure.³¹ Similarly, it is remarkable that Cronenberg has his (largely male) audience identify with Rose as she preys on men.

By far the best example of this tendency in *Rabid* is the scene in the porno theatre, which Rose deliberately attends in the hopes of attracting a sexually aggressive man. Cronenberg states on the commentary for this scene, "here's Rose finally really coming to terms with who she is and what she is and what she has to do to survive. She's become the hunter. And

she's going deliberately to a place where she will be hunted in order to 'turn the tables' on the predators she's going to meet."³² Cronenberg emphasizes how sleazy the man who approaches Rose is—lying about his intentions, saying he wants to sit next to her to protect her from other men and to have some of her popcorn. He begins to touch her almost instantly, ignoring Rose's comment that she is always being bothered by strange men when she goes to porno theatres. We see him entirely through her eyes, and cannot but feel, again, that he gets what's coming to him, that there is once again a logic of "come-uppance" at work. It is odd that neither Cronenberg nor Wood comment on the extremely fitting justice of this scene, that a porno movie actress who might be seen as having been sexually exploited in her career ends up playing a character who preys on a porno theatre attendee; surely the irony was not lost on Chambers.

Whatever the word for the psychology of such sequences may be, it is *not* simply "misogyny". Rose is in many regards sympathetic, attractive, an arbiter of justice, and the film's main character, something very unusual for a horror film made at this time. Wood lessens the impact of his arguments by failing to acknowledge such elements, and seems to vindicate Cronenberg's claim that his criticism exhibits traces of the employ of "a Procrustean bed of applying a standard, and the things that fit are good and the things that don't fit are bad."³³ This is not to say that there is not also a troubling element of misogyny (or at least anti-feminism) in suggesting, as *Rabid* seems to, that "giving a woman a penis" will result in social disaster, but it does suggest that Cronenberg's response to Rose is far more complex than Wood allows.

From *Shivers* to *Rabid*, we see a marked increase in the intensity of anti-female aspects of Cronenberg's project; these will climax with *The Brood*, the least defensible of the three films. Questions of *The Brood's* misogyny turn almost entirely on a consideration of the representation of Carveth's wife, Nola. It is crucial to understanding Cronenberg's depiction of this character that the director freely admits the autobiographical nature of *The Brood*, and that Nola is meant as a stand-in for his ex-wife, whom he had just divorced. Cronenberg, interviewed about the film, explains that "*The Brood*... was cathartically satisfying in a very direct way... I can't tell you how satisfying the climax is. I wanted to strangle my ex-wife."³⁴ Such autobiographical elements in the film have led at least one critic, Caelum Vatnsdal, to clear Cronenberg of accusations of misogyny, since, as Vatnsdal says somewhat glibly, "one viewing of *The Brood* makes it plain that, rather than hating and fearing all women, Cronenberg hates and fears

The Brood



The Brood



one woman in particular: his ex-wife."³⁵ Wood feels freer to generalize, seeing Nola as a representation of "female activeness (masculinity)"³⁶ with the depiction of her at the film's climax being "remarkable for its literal enactment...of the Freudian perception that, under patriarchy, the child becomes the woman's penis-substitute, Samantha Eggar's latest off-spring representing, unmistakably, a monstrous phallus."³⁷

Cronenberg responds to Wood not by denying such observations, but by arguing that there is no reason to read Nola as representing all women. "As a creator of characters, I believe I have the freedom to create a character who is not meant to represent all characters. In other words, I can create a woman as a character who does not represent all women."³⁸ Wood objects to this, seeing it as "merely another instance of [Cronenberg's] extraordinary ideological innocence,"³⁹ but there is some truth in the point the director makes, which becomes particularly apparent when he applies the argument to his depiction of *Videodrome's* kinky radio host Nicki Brand/Deborah Harry. He argues, "So what if I show Debbie Harry as a character who burns her breast with a cigarette, does that mean that I am suggesting that all women want to burn their breasts with cigarettes? That's juvenile. That's ridiculous."⁴⁰

The problem is, Nola and Nicki Brand are treated in remarkably different ways by the director. Throughout *Videodrome*, Cronenberg encourages audiences to respond to Nicki as an individual. She is complex and self-contradictory, in the way humans tend to be, speaking against "overstimulation" while wearing a red dress, taking a compassionate and dominant role with her callers while being masochistic and submissive in private. Further, the director seems to have no great personal investment in Nicki's fate; we are allowed by the film to feel however we will about Nicki—the film makes no case for our liking or hating her, or for generalizing from Nicki to women in general.

None of this can be said of Nola. With the exception of a very few scenes where we see Nola's inner torment, the general thrust of the film is to encourage audiences to identify with Frank in his act of murdering her. She is portrayed as biologically monstrous, possessed of an organ that seems not only phallic but appears as a grotesque caricature of female internal anatomy. She is unfazed at the thought that her brood has committed murders on her behalf and seems entirely willing to have them harm her daughter to punish Frank. Worse still, the implication is that it is Nola's biology, and not Raglan's meddling, that is behind her transformation: we are told that she had strange lumps on her throughout her childhood, that she was "born" to prove the value of Psychoplasms, and that, in Nola's own words, she is a "very special person" because of this, all of which suggests that her monstrosity is innate. Since her mother was abusive and her daughter also shows signs of strange lumps at the film's end, there is the suggestion that this innate monstrosity is in fact a characteristic of the female; that women (or at least three out of four of them present as characters in the film) are biologically predisposed to it.

Another aspect of Nola's monstrosity that bears remarking upon is that nothing in the narrative balances it out, something quite exceptional in Cronenberg's cinema, which is often characterized in terms of ambivalence, contradiction, and a balancing of opposites. These are features of the director's psychology which Cronenberg himself has remarked upon:

I'm cursed with balance, which is to say I immediately see all sides to the story at once. And they are all equal, they all seem to have equal weight... The standard way of looking at *Shivers* is as a tragedy but there's a paradox in it that also extends to how society looks at me. Here is a man who walks around and is sweet—he likes people, he's warm, friendly, he's articulate and he makes these horribly diseased, grotesque, disgusting movies. Now, what's real? Those things are both real for the person standing outside. For me those two parts of myself are inextricably bound together. The reason I'm secure is because I'm crazy. The reason I'm stable is because I'm nuts.⁴¹

This is borne out in his films, where Cronenberg typically weighs both sides of an argument, and creates an equal-and-opposite force for each protagonist or monster. The horror of the parasites in *Shivers* is balanced by the release of repressed energy they bring; Rose's monstrosity and the chaos that ensues from it are balanced by her empowerment and the justice she imparts. Similarly, Cronenberg's own statements about these films are rife with contradiction/balance. He admits to "a certain savage joy"⁴² in showing the residents of *Shivers'* anti-septic, orderly Starliner Towers "running, screaming, naked down the halls"⁴³ but he also admits openly that revolution frightens him ("People who say 'Revolution now' and aren't worried by it are foolish. The lesson of history... is that revolution brings with it death, pain, anguish and disease; often nothing positive to replace what was destroyed."⁴⁴) Similarly, Cronenberg, while expressing subversive glee at getting to shoot Santa Claus in the shopping mall sequences of *Rabid*⁴⁵ has also made statements defending middle class values ("I was raised in a basically middle-class way, and I'm not prepared to totally throw out middle-class America. I think there are some things that are very valuable in the middle-class."⁴⁶) As Handling writes "Cronenberg's world is full of this continual dialectic tension, incorporating the dualities of good and evil, the mind and body, the rational and the irrational, the id and the superego, liberation and repression."⁴⁷

The Brood stands out from the director's other films not just because of its autobiographical elements, but because in the film, Nola's grotesque biology is nowhere balanced by either an equal evil on the part of the male (as whatever shortcomings Carveth or Raglan may have, they are no monsters), nor by a concomitant good offered by Psychoplasms, which seems dubious and cultish from the outset. Any considerations of the value of therapy are completely abandoned when we see Nola licking the blood and afterbirth off her newborn broodnik; the image of her monstrosity is so horrifying it overwhelms all else in the film.

Some of the ideological naivete that Wood accuses Cronenberg of can perhaps be seen in Cronenberg's puzzlement that this scene in particular was selected for censorship.

I had a long and loving closeup of Eggar licking the fetus that was quite fantastic. I really regret that it's not in the final version of the film. The ironic thing is that when the censors, those animals, cut it out, the result was that a lot of people thought she was eating the baby! That's much worse than I was suggesting... What we're talking about here is an image that's not sexual, not violent, just gooey... gooey and disturbing. It's a bitch licking her pups. Why cut it out?⁴⁸

Without wishing to defend censorship, one obvious reply might be that the image is an inexcusably misogynist representation of the female and a grotesque caricature of motherhood. That Cronenberg fails to understand why the images of the "bitch licking her pups" might be viewed as offensive demonstrates that there may indeed be pieces missing from his political self-awareness.

All the same, there are other readings of *The Brood* possible. Stephen Schiff sees Nola as "the reflection of the filmmaker as artist. Her giving birth is the ultimate act of self-expression, a perfect metaphor for the way an artist wills his creation into being but cannot entirely control it."⁴⁹ As puzzling as this may seem as a reading of *The Brood*, it is quite in keeping with Cronenberg's own comments about his previous monstrous female, Rose, and in general about characters of his who are "forced to become outsiders, not necessarily by their nature but by circumstances beyond their control." If Rose matches, for Cronenberg, "the archetype of the artist, who becomes a kind of creature, becomes a monster, becomes an outsider because of his perceptions, because of what he feels driven to do by his art," perhaps so too does Nola.⁵⁰

Thus, if the representation of Nola in *The Brood* is indefensibly misogynist, it still need not be the last word on the film, or on the artist who crafted the character, especially since Cronenberg's later cinema, as already mentioned, shows the development of an artist more than willing to query himself and own his issues with women. If the depiction of Nola in *The Brood* serves as the strongest argument in favour of Wood's "attack" on Cronenberg's cinema, it need not be used as the basis of a thorough repudiation of Cronenberg's early features. If anything, it stands out as an exceptional moment, the sole point where Cronenberg loses balance and allows his emotions to overwhelm him.

Robin Wood's arguments against Cronenberg's early features have force precisely because he does actually see Cronenberg's reactionary side quite clearly. Beyond a doubt, there are moments in all three of the films in question where Cronenberg depicts "active" women as monstrous, holds up the ideas of sexual liberation and female emancipation as horrifying, and cringes at the prospect of social upheaval. Where Wood goes wrong is that these elements are often only half of a binary, presented (Nola aside) alongside equal-and-opposite forces—a joy in revolution, a hostility to middle-class complacency, a fascination for monstrosity, and a desire to see things fall apart. Left to choose between images that vacillate between attraction and repulsion, approval and disgust, beauty and ugliness, revolution and reaction, sympathy and horror, Wood tries to force Cronenberg to occupy only the latter half of each binary. Yet both sides are often equally present in Cronenberg's cinema, and need to be noted in any attempt to read these films. Cronenberg's skill at articulating his own contradictory impulses is precisely what makes his cinema valuable for progressive purposes, even if his occasional excesses prove problematic. His cinema provides a venue for working out one's own ambivalences, for acknowledging what is both empowering and horrifying in social (or bodily) change, and for exploring the fertile but troubled ground between culturally conceived binaries, for what liberation may be found there.

With thanks to Tom Charity and Ernest Mathijs.

Notes

- 1 Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979): 24.
- 2 Robin Wood, "Cronenberg: A Dissenting View," in *The Shape of Rage* (Don Mills: Academy of Canadian Cinema, 1983): 128.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 125.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 128.
- 5 William Beard, "The Visceral Mind: The Major Films of David Cronenberg," in *The Shape of Rage*, 19.
- 6 Paul M. Sammon, "David Cronenberg: Canada's One-Man Horror Industry Shakes Off the Stigma of Being a 'Schlock' Director," in *Cinefantastique* 10:4 (Illinois: 1980): 26.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 8 Serge Grünberg, *David Cronenberg: Interviews with Serge Grünberg* (London: Plexus, 2006): 39-40.
- 9 Wood, 1983, 132.
- 10 Wood, 1979, 24.
- 11 Chris Rodley, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992): 66-67.
- 12 These arguments fit with Ernest Mathijs' observation that the "revolution" depicted in *Shivers* raises the question not of the "morality" of revolution, but of its "pragmatics: what succeeds in overthrowing an order, and who benefits?" Mathijs sees this "attitude encapsulated in the moniker 'Hobbes,' which our mad scientist shares with the English seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, famously known for his *homo homini lupus* (man is a wolf to men)—stressing self-interest and survival as the key motivators to human actions." Simply put, Hobbes has designed a revolution of which he hopes he will be the beneficiary. See Ernest Mathijs: *The Cinema of David Cronenberg: From Baron of Blood to Cultural Hero* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008): 35-36.
- 13 Schiff, Stephen. "The Brood." Movie review, in *Produced and Abandoned: The National Society of Film Critics Write on the Best Films You've Never Seen*. (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1990): 256-258.
- 14 Wood, 1983, 131.
- 15 David Cronenberg, *Rabid* commentary (Toronto: Somerville House, 2004.)
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Beard, 19.
- 18 Also in the *Rabid* commentary, Cronenberg observes that not only have we failed to accept our own bodies, but have further "never accepted the environment as it was given to us. We want light at night and we want heat when it's cold and so on."
- 19 Sammon, 34.
- 20 Cited in Wood, 1983, 134.
- 21 Wood, 1983, 128.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 129.
- 23 Wood, 1979, 24.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 25 See, for instance, the interview with David Cronenberg in Adam Simon's *The American Nightmare: A Celebration of Film's from Horror's Golden Age of Fright* (New York: Docurama, 2003).
- 26 William Beard and Piers Handling, "The Interview," in *The Shape of Rage*, 178.
- 27 Beard, 20.
- 28 Wood, 1983, 130.
- 29 *Rabid* commentary
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992): 35-41.
- 32 *Rabid* commentary
- 33 Susan Ayscough, "David Cronenberg: Sex... Porn... Censorship... Art... Politics... And Other Terms." Interview. *Cinema Canada* #102 (Scarborough: Canadian Society of Cinematographers, 1983): 16.
- 34 Rodley, 84.
- 35 Caelum Vatnsdal. *They Came from Within: A History of Canadian Horror Cinema*. (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2004): 124.
- 36 Wood, 1983, 130-131.
- 37 Wood, 1979, 24.
- 38 Ayscough, 17.
- 39 Wood, 1983, 131.
- 40 Ayscough, 17.
- 41 Beard/ Handling, 176-178.
- 42 Quoted in Beard, 19.
- 43 Beard/Handling, 179.
- 44 Rodley, 66-67.
- 45 *Rabid* commentary.
- 46 Ayscough, 17.
- 47 Piers Handling, "A Canadian Cronenberg," in *The Shape of Rage*, 102.
- 48 Rodley, 85.
- 49 Schiff, 262.
- 50 *Rabid* commentary.



Ideology in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*

By DREW WINCHUR

In the West, propaganda films are nowadays an exceedingly rare art form. Few filmmakers are interested in making didactic arguments for or against “the capitalist order” or “Western empire”; investors willing to fund such work are undoubtedly even rarer. As a case in point, Christopher Nolan’s *Inception*¹ is a conventional Hollywood suspense movie that completely omits any explicit reference to politics. Its narrative focuses on a corporate thief named Dom Cobb/Leonardo DiCaprio, as he frantically grapples with the aftermath of his wife’s suicide, while also trying to return home to his young children. The trauma of excessive guilt and the necessity of grieving are the film’s most obvious and important themes. Yet despite *Inception*’s supposed focus on individual psychology, this foregrounding of Cobb’s emotional turmoil in fact sublimates and rationalizes some disturbingly violent behaviour. Hired by a corporation to “neutralize” an important competitor, Cobb and his associates use futuristic, *Matrix*-like technology to invade the consciousness of a man named Robert Fischer, Jr./Cillian Murphy. They then succeed in implanting a suggestion in Fischer’s mind that causes him to sabotage his own financial interests (the titular “inception”). By bracketing these acts as the uncontroversial circumstance of Cobb’s emotional struggle, *Inception* covertly legitimizes the routine and far-reaching violence used to sustain corporate empires. In practice, if not by design, the film proves to be a highly sophisticated vehicle for capitalist propaganda.

In the production notes to the film, Nolan indicates that

[i]t was very important to [Leonardo DiCaprio] that [the emotional life of his character] be the guiding thread of the story, and with it he is able to draw the audience through the [film’s] complex story in a very clear fashion.²

DiCaprio’s priorities are indeed evident from the very first scenes of the film. Cobb’s unresolved grief for his wife Mal/Marion Cotillard is singularly responsible for the failure of his preliminary mission into the dreams of Saito/Ken Watanabe (his eventual employer). As he gathers a team of criminals and prepares to invade Fischer’s mind, Cobb is repeatedly confronted with the danger that Mal poses, both in regards to his own psyche and his corporate mission. Finally, and most importantly, Cobb’s mission is accomplished only after he definitively rejects Mal’s claims about the nature of their relationship, and accepts his share of guilt for her death. It is this symbolic resolution—as much as the success of the team’s real mission—that allows Cobb to return home to America and his children. The lack of emotional tension and conspicuous absence of Fischer during the film’s denouement is a final signal that Cobb’s psychic pain is the driving force of the film.

This emotional journey, however, does not merely function

as an engine for the film's plot. The role given to Ellen Page's character, Ariadne, suggests that there is a more duplicitous agenda behind this emphasis on Cobb's psyche. As the young university student recruited by Cobb to design the mission's dream-world, Ariadne functions as a proxy for the audience and as Cobb's personal psychotherapist. Nolan has admitted that

[i]n writing the script for 'Inception,' it was very important to me that there be a conduit for the audience—a character who is being shown this world for the first time and is eager to explore it. That's how the character of Ariadne was born. It was also very important for the audience to see Cobb through Ariadne's eyes and get to the core of that character.³

The very origin of Ariadne's name affirms this connection: i.e., a mythical Greek princess who helps the minotaur-slayer Theseus to navigate a labyrinth. Coaxing and guiding Cobb through his darkest memories, Ariadne both demands and provides "more objective" interpretations of what she sees and what she is told. At the same time, this character forcefully narrows the viewer's scope of potential interests, to the point that a fixation on Cobb's mental state is almost inevitable. As Fischer's subconscious becomes more dangerous and difficult for the team to navigate, it is Ariadne who demands that Cobb reappraise their collective predicament and his own psychological health. Cobb then confesses to her (and the viewer) the details of his wife's suicide and his subsequent exile from the United States. After Cobb confesses this secret, Ariadne asks no further questions, and wholeheartedly accepts his rather feeble reassurances as to their collective safety. She also fails to voice any qualms about his selfish recklessness in trying to withhold this information. Once Mal succeeds in sabotaging the mission at the third and deepest level of Fischer's subconscious, Ariadne insists on following Cobb into his own chaotic mind; it is there that she provides him with strong emotional support during his climactic confrontation with and triumph over Mal (whose name, not coincidentally, means "sickness" in French). Here again, she blithely accepts Cobb's story of apparent emotional catharsis at face value. Pertinent questions remain unasked, relating to the impact of this breakthrough on Cobb's future life, not to mention the mission still underway.

For all of her adeptness at critically interpreting Cobb's psychological struggles, Ariadne is tellingly silent in the face of his real behaviour. After a feeble protest against Cobb's offer of employment, she joins the team and fails to raise a single concern about the immorality of their mission. In her enthusiasm for playing therapist to Cobb (and despite the empathy she demonstrates in this capacity), Ariadne seems untroubled by the team's inherently violent trespass into Fischer's mind. Since "the audience [sees] Cobb through Ariadne's eyes", this tacit acceptance of a controversial norm illuminates the film's true ideological leanings.

Ariadne's support of Cobb is perhaps justifiable during the innocent beginnings of their relationship, but proves less and less credible as the film wears on. By the time Fischer has been kidnapped within his own subconscious, Cobb resembles less a grieving widower than a murderous thug. Shoved into locked rooms and unmarked vans, handcuffed, repeatedly threatened and drugged, and beaten with an insouciance bordering on contempt, Fischer's body is gradually stripped of its humanity





and debased to the level of anonymous hostage. When Cobb needs Fischer to fabricate a non-existent security code, a member of the team impersonates Fischer's godfather and most trusted confidant. Fischer is then convinced that this imposter will be murdered if he refuses to cooperate. Later, upon revealing to Fischer that his dreams have in fact been invaded, Cobb pitilessly capitalizes on the fear and vulnerability that this disclosure understandably provokes. Throughout all of this, Ariadne seems oblivious to the protagonist's descent into near-sociopathic criminality.

Perhaps most disturbing is the corruption of Fischer's already troubled relationship with his recently deceased father. The entire dynamic and meaning of this private bond is falsified by Fischer Sr.'s dramatic, deathbed confession—a confession that has, in fact, been scripted and stage-managed by Cobb. Given repeated chances to reflect on this profound transgression, Cobb's response is always the same selfish shrug: "I'll do whatever it takes to get back to my family." Ariadne's staunch refusal (or inability) to address this violence is a crippling blow to her credibility — both as pseudo-therapist and proxy to the viewer.

By now, it should be obvious that the director has structured *Inception* in such a way as to equate reality with a concern for Cobb's well-being. Without this disproportionate investment in the protagonist's internal world, audiences might have drawn very different conclusions as to this character's final significance.

II

In his review of Kathryn Bigelow's film *The Hurt Locker*, Slavoj Žižek comments on the way in which that film's exclusive focus on American troops "enables us to obliterate the entire ethico-political background of the [American- Iraqi] conflict:"

Depictions of the daily horror and traumatic impact of serving in a war zone seem to put [the film] miles apart from such sentimental celebrations of the US army's humanitarian role as John Wayne's infamous *Green Berets*. However, we should bear in mind that the terse-realistic presentation of the absurdities of war in *The Hurt Locker* obfuscates and thus makes acceptable the fact that its heroes are doing exactly the same job as the heroes of *The Green Berets*. In its very invisibility, ideology is here, more than ever: we are there, with our boys, identifying with their fear and anguish instead of questioning what they are doing there.⁴

Similar tactics are at work throughout *Inception*: the disturbing immorality of Cobb's mission is rendered invisible by the film's insistent focus on Cobb's struggle between guilt and redemption. An innocent man is drugged and mentally violated by corporate raiders; the most private realms of his personality are

corrupted; a son is coerced into swallowing a bald deceit about his recently deceased father. Yet the viewer is meant to sleep-walk past it all, convinced that the real story lies with Cobb and his own claim to emotional distress.

From this perspective, the narrative of *Inception* can be seen to have two closely related functions. At one level, the film works as corporate propaganda. As a means by which corporations habitually expand their overwhelming powers over the rest of society, white-collar violence poses a direct threat to the democratic body politic. By disguising such aggression as the benign setting of private turmoil, *Inception* coerces the viewer into legitimizing behaviour that she might otherwise find morally and politically revolting.

It might be argued that the abuse inflicted on Fischer is not real, and that he will awaken without any memory of the trauma he has suffered. The film's focus on Cobb's emotional struggle would therefore be justifiable, since only this struggle carries over into "true" reality. Yet such a thesis would contradict much of what we learn from observing Cobb and Mal's relationship. Mal's dreamed life proves to be so vivid that she commits suicide in a bid to recapture it. While on the lookout for a new "architect" to add to his team, Cobb pays a visit to Mal's father, Miles/Michael Caine, who advises him to "come back to reality" and forget the mission. Cobb, however, clings to his dream-world intrigues, explaining that the deal with Saito represents the only way back to his children. Examples such as these hardly suggest that one's dreams can be taken lightly; rather, they tend to leave deep scars and serious responsibilities in their wake.

The ending of the film, featuring a close-up of Cobb's talisman spinning ominously on a table, carries the strong suggestion that his idyllic family reunion might itself be a dream. At first, this ambiguity also seems to undermine a reading of *Inception* as propaganda. If Cobb has in fact only traded one set of illusions for another, what good is his symbolic victory over debilitating grief? He is perhaps lost to new delusions; his future might be less authentic than that of the man whose mind he so successfully corrupted. Wouldn't this make him a deserving candidate for the audience's sympathy? On the contrary, the uncertainty surrounding Cobb's future only bolsters the audience's commitment to describing and treating their protagonist-patient's psychological state. Such a duplicitous and/or deluded character, whose symptoms run an entire gamut of possible pathologies, fits the very ideal of a psychiatric patient. If Cobb's capability for self-delusion is potentially endless, the audience's preoccupation with his inner state—and resulting ignorance of all political consequence—is potentially endless as well.

III

Inception's secondary and more radical function is to suggest that the act of self-delusion is potentially heroic. The film's protagonist, for example, succeeds in consistently denying or sublimating the violence he inflicts. To carry out the immoral behaviour demanded by his role as a corporate raider, Cobb learns to translate his actions into a symbolic language that renders them psychologically and socially acceptable. This character is heroic not for what he does, but for what he succeeds in convincing himself of having done. Each time his transgressions are in danger of losing ethical credibility, Cobb explains them away as the regrettable means to an honourable end, or else situates them in relation to his psychic contest with Mal. In one such episode, Cobb and Ariadne follow Fischer into "limbo"—

a deeply chaotic state of consciousness. Cobb hardly even cares to rescue Fischer, and upon entering his old dream-world, the ostensible purpose for his visit is quickly forgotten. Instead, he regales Ariadne with detailed stories of the (virtual) years spent here with his deceased wife. After Fischer is (almost inadvertently) located, Cobb's climactic showdown with Mal immediately retakes centre stage.

After following Ariadne back to the third level of his own subconscious, Fischer experiences a cringe-inducing reconciliation with a man he believes to be his dead father. The scene should serve as a ringing indictment of the inception's moral bankruptcy: the father is in fact only an imposter, and the understanding the two men reach is profoundly false. It is very soon after this event that Cobb resurrects his own surrogate (and highly implausible) father-son relationship with Saito. The heroism and self-sacrifice involved in Saito's rescue, coupled with the fulfillment of Cobb's meaningless promise that the two men "grow old together," symbolically crowds out Fischer's competing and dissonant story of falsified reconciliation. The viewer might register a passing discomfort with Fischer's catharsis, but he is distracted before any of the feeling's causes can be examined.

Once the mission is over, Cobb's team disbands and the protagonist is finally able to reunite with his children. The film ends with the happy family contemplating a profoundly uncertain future. What is certain, however, is that Cobb has successfully escaped all responsibility for the injustice done to Fischer. Whether his idyllic life in America proves to be real or a dream, Cobb's past sins have been resolutely forgotten. Here, the pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment becomes nothing more than an exercise in cynical self-delusion. It pays for Cobb to commit violence in the name of corporate profit, since he is adept enough at interpreting his actions according to an acceptably honourable narrative. Through the course of the film, audiences learn that corporate violence is normal, and that preventing it is unnecessary—the task of the individual is to create a delusion compelling and narcissistic enough to render that violence invisible.

IV

Taken together, *Inception's* ideological manoeuvres are impressive. Its hero models a rewarding and compliant relationship with corporate power, while all evidence of the ugly side-effects is suppressed. His pseudo-therapist and sidekick turns a blind eye to his repeated and serious transgressions, persuading the audience to follow suit. The twists and turns of their labyrinthine mission supposedly represent one man's exorcism of personal demons; in reality, they are just a fanciful dramatization of a corporate takeover. *Inception* renders the violence motivated by corporate profit unremarkable and incidental to a "real" personal story such as Cobb's. True happiness, we learn, requires only the talent to successfully alienate oneself from moral and civic responsibilities.

Notes

- 1 U.S. release date, July 16, 2010.
- 2 Christopher Nolan. Quoted in "Inception: Production Notes", http://inceptionmovie.warnerbros.com/pdf/INCEPTION_PK_Notes_Bios_6-18.pdf (accessed August 6, 2010), p. 7.
- 3 Ibid. 8.
- 4 Slavoj Žižek. "Green Berets with a Human Face," (London Review of Books Blog, 2010), <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2010/03/23/slavoj-zizek/green-berets-with-a-human-face> (accessed August 6, 2010).

Wajdi Mouawad in Cinema

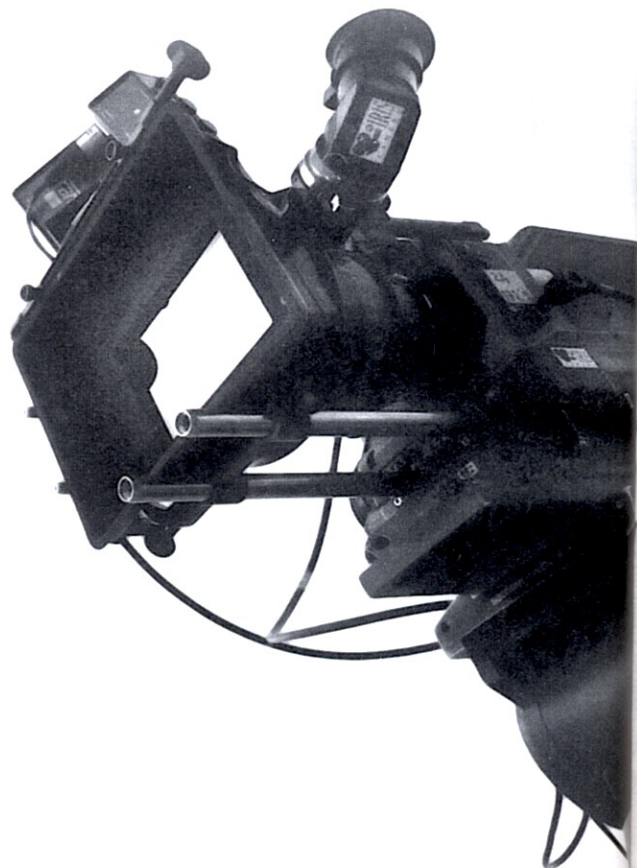
ORIGINS, WARS
AND FATE

By MAY TELMISSANY

"Unknown and alone, I have returned to wander through my native country, which lies about me like a vast graveyard; and perhaps what awaits me is the knife of the hunter who preserves us Greeks for his sport even as he does the wild beasts of the forest."

(Holderlin, *Hyperion*)¹

The question of origins in Wajdi Mouawad's plays and film adaptations *Littoral* (published in 1999 and directed by Wajdi Mouawad in 2004) and *Incendies* (published in 2003 and directed by Denis Villeneuve in 2010) is concomitant to the question of belonging. Both questions are explored from multiple perspectives and both suggest various beginnings. While the plays combine references to different arts² as well as references to Greek and classical tragedies, the film adaptations seem to distance themselves from the plays' dialogical structure and introduce some narrative coherence into the discontinued and scattered timeline of war and memory depicted in the plays. This article will compare Mouawad's depiction of the question of origins in light of the historical and philosophical reality of war and study how origins are conditioned by fate imposed on the tragic hero. *Littoral* tells the



Wajdi Mouawad

story of a Canadian-Lebanese young man, Wahab, who struggles to bury his father in his parents' homeland. Throughout his journey, he discovers the truth about his father, and more importantly he discovers his country of birth ruined by war and terrorism. *Incendies* follows Jane, a Canadian-Lebanese daughter who strives to find traces of her father and brother in the rubble of a war-torn country she never knew. Both Wahab and Jane are sent on a quest, and both discover the roots of their multiple identities upon their parents' death, while travelling across their parents' country of birth.

The powerful and multilayered construction of Mouawad's plays offers various beginnings to the narrative of origins, whether it is the narrative of the nomad (immigrant/traveler) or the narrative of war and displacement. The plot is built in order to explore, understand and challenge the conceptions of belonging and distance, of Self and Other, of identity constructions and postmodern dislocations. Both film adaptations respect and explore these elements and features; they also investigate the possibility of bringing together the reflection on war and the history of war in Lebanon within the "realist mode of representation" inherent to cinema, which helps in exploring the major questions of the plays under a different light. Hence, as one can see in cinema, the physical and material horrors of war take precedence over the transcendental tragedy of war depicted in the plays; moreover, both film adaptations open the door to clear partisanship and provoke controversy among film spectators who were mainly skeptical about the historical/sociological accuracy in both films as well as their political implications.

Also within the cinematic context, the question of origins is altered in order to link together the immigrant's situation which involves at least two different cultures (Canadian and Lebanese) and the theme of civil war as a tragic event in Lebanon. Following the death of a parent, the hero is compelled to travel in quest for an answer to three recurring questions: who am I, where do I belong and how can I reconcile my multiple belongings, including belonging to my family's own history, within the context of displacement? In a much broader sense, *Oneness* (the One as opposed to the Multiple) which used to be a chief value in Modern Western thought seems no longer valid in the postmodern era when multiplicity has become the condition of the transnational individuals like the author and his characters. The displaced or the expatriate like Mouawad, and the temporal nomad like most of his characters, seek answers through the artistic expression (with its intrinsic logic of fragmentation and multiple beginnings) and through travelling and dislocation. Origins are therefore nourished and developed as an object of knowledge not as an object of national worship; similarly, the author and protagonists who look for truth and salvation learn through their journey that knowledge can only be accomplished thanks to movement and displacement.

In other words, knowledge of one's origins is constantly deterritorialized; it is achieved through an inescapable journey in time and space, back to the time of war, back to the place of birth, and back to the Greek and classical tragedies as major sources of inspiration. In fact, Mouawad's plays (and his single film to a lesser extent) add to the complexity of the question of origins by multiplying the intertextual relationships with Sophocles' masterpieces *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.³ For example, in *Incendies*, the mother falls into silence and dies after discovering that her lost son was also her persecutor in prison and the father of her twin son and daughter. The daughter (more than the son) is haunted

throughout the film by the mother's ghost who knew before dying the identity of her persecutor and killer; exactly like in *Littoral*, where the father's ghost is following the son to help him understand the reasons of his disappearance years before his death. The transposition of the Greek and classical characters and themes into the contemporary setting of war in Lebanon allows for a new interpretation of what it means to be aware of one's own history (including the history of the literary canon) and accept one's fate; to be able to relate the stories behind one's origins from different perspectives, and from different starting points; to recognize one's affiliation to family and nation as an inescapable bridge between childhood and adulthood. When they finally succumb to the twists and turns of fate, the protagonists achieve adulthood and accomplish their quest for truth. Both their agency and their intellectual freedom are determined by the amount of truth they come to reveal: "There are truths that can only be revealed when they have been discovered."⁴ says the mother Nawal to her daughter in *Incendies*. Yet unlike their Greek and classical counterparts, Oedipus, Antigone and Hamlet, Mouawad's protagonists are portrayed as nomads and outcasts, as immigrants and misfits. They are depicted in constant movement, much as Mouawad himself, learning about their origins and looking for the true story behind their parents' life and death. And while they explore their land of birth of which they know nothing, they also discover the meaning of their parents' silence and the signification of their tragic life. The viewer is therefore invited to reconstruct the parents' story out of flashbacks, symbols, signs and props (e.g. tapes, letters) as the story unfolds throughout the children's journey.

In addition to the textual/intertextual dimension, themes of war and fate are dealt with differently in both plays compared to the film adaptations. The plays deal with war and fate as themes within a larger humanitarian discourse that transcends the mega-narrative(s) of the Lebanese civil war. On the contrary, the films deal with war and fate as the expressions of immanence, relocating the narrative within its social, historical and political contexts and challenging the impression of reality altogether. One could argue that the tension between the divine and the profane takes place in the battle field of cinematic representation, re-defining the romantic perception of tragedy and fate and relocating the very idea of being *Other* (and/or *Different* in one's own culture) in a rather naturalistic fashion which delves into the horrors of war and the impossible salvation of mankind. However, Mouawad views theatre as the site of a "ruthless consolation"⁵ where the tragic and transcendental dimensions of war and Otherness are challenged on the plane of immanence, in writing, while writing. The process of writing itself has to do with the way Mouawad perceives of himself as a member of a larger group, as an *Other* within the *Same* in a rather epic way, when his own voice embodies the voice of the Greek chorus and *vice versa*. He explains in the preface to the English version of *Incendies* that the writing continued during the rehearsals, in an attempt to challenge the traditional conceptualization of a ready-to-play text produced by an all-knowing writer: "Throughout the entire period, I felt that the troupe, with its technicians and actors laying the groundwork for the writing, was at the heart of the process (...) It must be said, it must be heard: *Incendies* was born of this group, the writing was channeled through me. Step by step to the very last word."⁶

While analyzing the multiple links between the question of

origins, the quest for truth and the reflection on war and displacement, this article seeks to answer the following questions: what role does the diasporic condition play in Mouawad's approach to the question of origins? What is the impact of war as a subject of reflection and as a historical event on both film adaptations? How is fate perceived in the plays and in the movies, and what links can be made between the tragic fate and war in Lebanon? The first part of this article contextualizes the question of origins in Mouawad's career as dramatist and filmmaker, with a special focus on the Oscar-nominated Genie-winning film *Incendies* by Denis Villeneuve, which offers a moving hymn to tolerance and a cry for the anti-militarization of religious and ethnic conflicts in Lebanon. The second part examines the relationship between war, fate and Otherness through the lens of Holderlin's concept of fate as a superior power to which the tragic hero must succumb in order to be punished. It will also explore Thierry Hentsche's discussion of death and narration as a way to understand Mouawad's infatuation with the question of origins and belonging in a world where displacement has become the modern expression of many heroic actions.

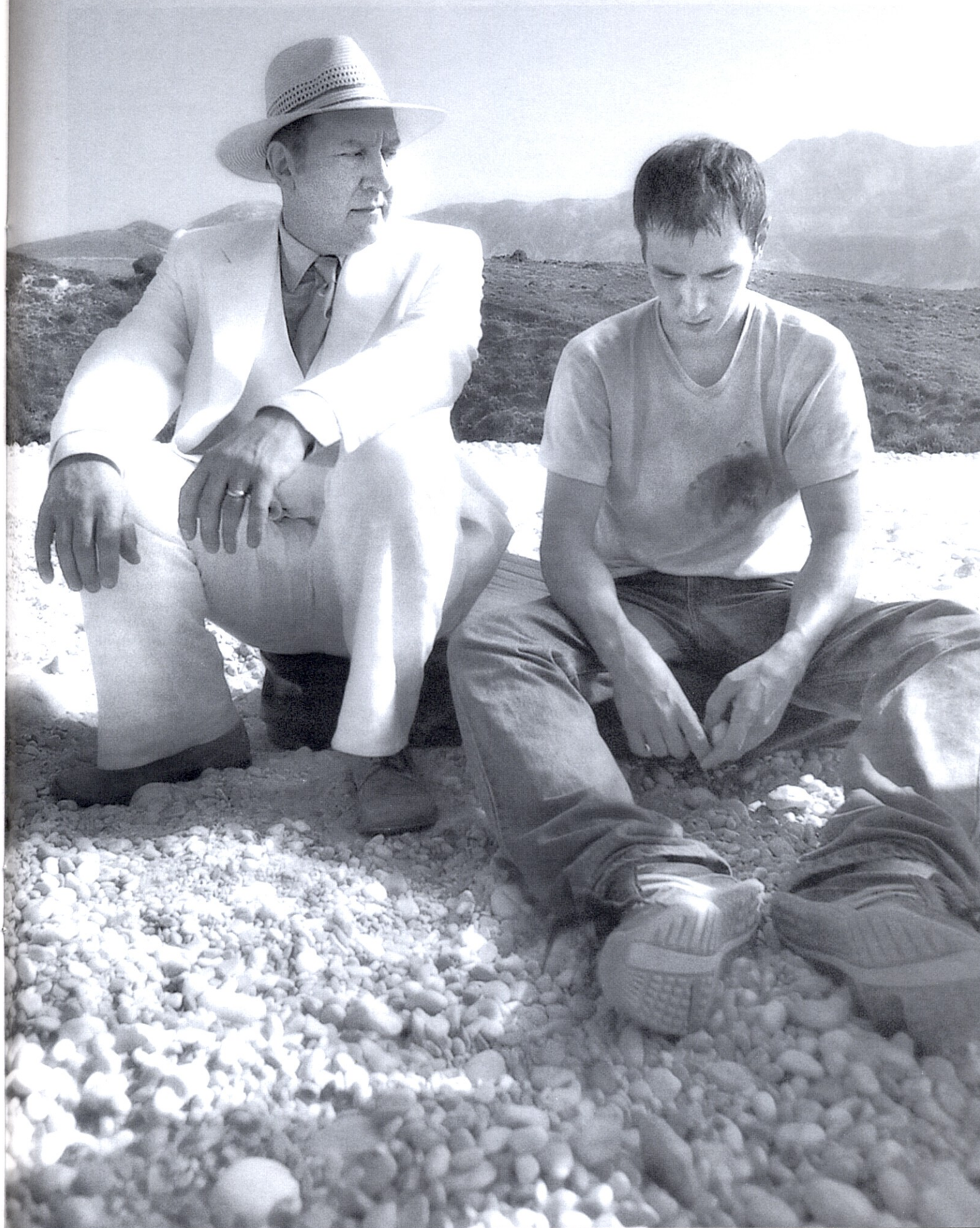
The Context: Transnational Cinema and the Question of Belonging

Haunting origins is not Mouawad's own innovation; it is one of the major topics explored in diasporic and transnational filmmaking as a tool to overcome the trauma of loss and displacement, and to restore order in a world of chaos and opacity. In fact, Arab Canadian filmmakers⁷ like their counterparts in Europe and the United States, introduce in their films three major socio-cultural features which deal more or less with the questions of origins: first the ethnic/cultural feature which draws attention to the staging of minority problems as well as majority/minority relationships in homeland and in hostland; second, the historical feature which explores the filmmakers' present and past through the investigation of the colonial and post-colonial history as well as the major historical events that might have led to movements of immigration and displacement; and third, the religious feature which is expressed through the manifestations of religious conservatism and the call for tolerance on one hand, and through the political instrumentalization of religion in times of war and conflict on the other hand.

It is important to relocate Mouawad's cinematic adaptations within this larger context of transnational and diasporic cinema made by filmmakers of Arab origins or based on their work. It is equally important to highlight Mouawad's hyphenated identity and the many lines of escape his work proposes beyond his Middle Eastern culture and his Canadian belonging. Born in 1968, Mouawad spent his childhood in Lebanon, his adolescence years in France and came to Canada in the late 1980s. His theatrical production in French is both locally and internationally acclaimed. In his plays *Littoral* and *Incendies*, the ethnic, cultural and religious identities (either Arab or Canadian, Christian or Muslim) are demoted for the benefit of a rather universal/cosmopolitan identity. Yet, it is obvious through the play of nouns and scattered allusions to geographic as well as regional characteristics, that both plays start in Canada and end in the Middle East. It is also noted that religious belongings are not criticized as such but rather demystified for the benefit of a clear-cut critique of the absurdity of conflicts based on religious affiliation in general.

His plays *Littoral* (1999) and *Incendies* (2003) are the first and second volumes of a four play cycle including *Forêts* (2006) and *Ciels* (2009). In this tetralogy, Mouawad was inspired by his own experience as an expatriate and by the tragic events of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) and the occupation of Southern Lebanon by Israel (1982-2000). But while in the plays, History is tempered by the universalist and poetic discourse on war, the film adaptations put forward the historical context of the Lebanese war in which ethnicity, culture and religion are challenged and denounced. The three features are illustrated in Mouawad's film adaptations and expressed through a powerful depiction of war conflicts in Lebanon. Nevertheless, both films attempt not to historicize the Lebanese war, rather to show and/or objectify it in all its absurdity as a series of burning flags and exploding identities: Christian versus Muslim, Palestinian and Syrian versus Lebanese, religious versus secular, left and liberal versus right and conservative. While the plays focus on the need to narrate the story (reproducing the chorus in the Greek tragedy), the films show the atrocities of war, criticize and reject the endless claims for absolute Truth and undisturbed certainties which generate hostilities and war crimes of all sorts. Despite the dark and nightmarish atmosphere of war in both films, *Incendies*—better than *Littoral* which eventually lacks artistic consistency—succeeds in giving glimpses of hope through the love relationship between a Muslim Palestinian (Wahab)⁸ and a Christian Lebanese (Nawal), as well as the attempts of healing the wounds when the twin sister and brother set off to discover the past of their mother and the identity of their absent father. The film comments on the love/solidarity relationship between the Palestinians and the Lebanese people which ended up creating a monster (the massacres of Palestinians in Lebanon). The son of the ill-fated couple is born in violence (his father was killed by his mother's brothers), forced to separate from his mother at his birth, and inevitably becomes the persecutor of his own mother, literally through torture and rape and morally through rejection and victimhood.

Ethnicity (Palestinian, Lebanese), culture (religious, secular) and religion (Christian, Muslim) are perceived in both films as justifications for "murderous identities."⁹ This aspect is beautifully explored in Villeneuve's cinematic approach to Mouawad's play. *Incendies* the film poetically demystifies all attempts to justify "murderous identities" from the national, cultural and religious points of view conveyed and denounced openly in the film. The realistic representation of time and space in *Incendies* has an important impact on how cultural belonging is asserted and highlighted. For instance, cultural belonging is enhanced by the constant use of Arabic, formally absent from the theatrical representations. Arabic helps anchor the cinematic narrative and establish cultural specificity in film. In addition to this, *Incendies* makes direct references to ethnicity and religion, where Lebanese and Palestinian, Christian and Muslim are identified and antagonized in order to reinforce the absurdity and the tragedy of the Lebanese civil war. The transcendental aspect of the play (either written or performed) and the referential aspect of the film suggest different interpretations and challenge the reader's and the spectator's imagination and knowledge as the realist mode of representation in cinema is forcibly territorialized in space and time. The territorialization of war in Mouawad's film adaptations leaves very little space to imagination, especially when the realistic mode of representation asserts identities and communitarian belongings, and





when narration (what is told) is transplanted by representation (what is shown).

Showing time and space in cinema is very often coded through the historic references and the visual presence on screen of specific places. In both films, "here" is obviously Canada, "there" is a representation of Lebanon, although the films were shot elsewhere, in Albania and in Jordan—which adds to the complexity of the cinematic delineation of reality. Throughout the narrative, the "cinematic Lebanon" is perceived as an alien country where fathers and mothers are born and towards which their Lebanese-Canadian children are forced to travel; and when they do, they recover part of their lost origins by symbolically burying the parents' past and exploring the possibility of a new beginning for themselves. The tragic dimension of loss and displacement is enhanced by the ethical dimension of responsibility and accountability. Parents are responsible for what happened to their country in one way or another, while Canadian-raised children pay the bills, not because they were part of their parents' illegitimate wars, but because of their tragic sense of duty and their insatiable quest for truth. Moreover, since the protagonists do not really wish to return to their homeland, the myth of return that constitutes one of the key features of any given diasporic community is deconstructed in favor of another activity: gaining knowledge and reconstructing History. Rather than defining cultural, historical and national ties at large, the quest for origins uncovers the secrets (turmoil and liability) of the departed parents and reconnects the protagonists with their family roots, family being the most important and the most knotty institution for a Lebanese-born person. However, Mouawad's diasporic situation helps him destabilize and deconstruct family ties, nationhood, dreams of return and other representations of homeland in an attempt to constantly demarcate tensions and uncertainties.

In *Littoral*, Wahab strives to execute his father's will in the same way that Antigone strives to bury her brother's remains against Creon's command. Wahab (who did not kill his father

like Oedipus did, but rather his mother, who died upon his birth) insists on burying his father in his native village against the rule of the villagers, thus he places ethics before power. And as his Lebanese identity as well as his father's identity are denied by the people, he is forced to bring the corpse to the sea where the father's body and ghost finally find peace and rest. The father's lyrical monologue at the end of the play and the film is striking: he welcomes his country's sun and water rather than the land in which he originally wished to be buried. Despite the symbolic instability of water and its mythical infinity, the father still wants to be anchored in the sea; his monologue highlights the tensions between territorialization and movement: "My soul is comforted...I'm returning to the great quiet of the depths (...). It's time for you to set off. Walk along the roads. Exhaust yourselves walking. Leave before day breaks, and rage, and rage."¹⁰ According to Denis Bachand's reading of the burial sequence in the film, the father's disappearance in the depths of the sea brings reconciliation and resolves contradictions;¹¹ in other words, it helps Wahab and his friends accept their fate as nomads, fatherless, godless nomads, walking towards the infinite sea and across the endless ever-changing timeline to which they truly belong.

At the shore, where the land meets the sea, and beginnings meet ends, Wahab is finally free of his father's past and of the country's violent history. He finally discovers he was a total stranger to his country of birth; but while traveling across the land towards the sea, he also discovers that his origins are no longer a mystery and that his sole Quebecois/Canadian identity can no longer define who he is. When Wahab witnesses the death of his trip companion Massi in a mine field, he decides to throw his Canadian passport in the grave with his friend's corpse. According to Denis Bachand's interpretation, Wahab "se soustrait à l'identification unique pour recouvrir la multiplicité de ses appartenances, pour enfin se sentir vierge et libre de citoyenneté, pluriel, adéquat, et réconcilié avec son passé et celui de ses ancêtres."¹² In my opinion, Wahab frees himself

symbolically from all national and cultural belongings as a way to denounce violence and to show that his friend's wish to immigrate to Canada has no value in the face of death. He bids his friend farewell on the borders of death where no physical borders (neither Canadian nor Lebanese) could separate him from his companion any more.

In *Incendies*, Nawal requests in her will to be buried properly only when her twin son and daughter have met their father (whom they thought was dead) and their brother (of whom they knew nothing). The daughter travels throughout her homeland to find her father and brother; parallel editing shows the mother herself years before while traveling in search of her lost son. Both daughter and mother wear more or less the same outfit, behave more or less the same way in the face of war and destruction. The daughter/mother mirror is coupled with the sister/brother one. The twin brother travels back to his country of birth later in the film and the story of his father/brother will be told to him rather than to his twin sister, a reminiscence of Oedipus's tragic moment of truth. With the truth discovered rather than revealed, the agency of the twin sister and brother is asserted, memory can be redeemed and the mother's silence

is finally explained and accepted. The play ends with the mother's silence recorded on tape and torrential rain outside the twins' room. The film ends with her son Nihad (aka Abu Tarek, her prison torturer and the father of her twins) facing his mother's grave in Canada, on a cloudy day, alone. In both cases, it is this refusal to explain, to interpret and to rationalize History that prevails and opens a new space for the tragic breadth of narration to expand and become the *raison d'être* of the protagonists' lonely journey.

The core issue in *Littoral* and *Incendies* is that film can be inspired by History but History cannot be translated into film. In both films, the children know very little about their parents' past, and very little about the country of their birth and its intricate History. In this, they do not represent Mouawad as an author fully aware and critical of his Lebanese origin; rather they represent second and third generations of Canadian-Lebanese children who can no longer hide from the tragic moment of truth. The films literally endorse what Nawal says in her red book speaking to her son and torturer: "We both come from the same land, the same languages, the same history, and each land, each language, each history is responsible for its



people, and each people is responsible for their traitors and their heroes. (...) We didn't like war or violence, but we went to war and were violent. Now all that is left is our possible dignity."¹³ In this context, History is no longer the source of moral wisdom, since there is no way one can learn from the past; it is rather the site of possible redemption felt and achieved in the present and for the future. The poignant testimony of the father in *Littoral* and of Nawal in *Incendies* either in the form of letters addressed to the son or in the form of diaries, open the gates of History to possible redemption, because the act of narration becomes an act of remembrance and consolation.

The sister and brother's journey represents a life-altering experience that brings them back to Canada, only to meet with an unwanted father who is also their brother and the persecutor of their deceased mother. The journey becomes therefore a subjective and lonely quest for truth, a burden not because of death but because of the unknown truths that lie down beneath it. The characters discover the horrors of war and the complex web of hostilities rooted in their country's history; their discoveries enhance their awareness of their parents' diasporic condition and at the same time bring them closer to their parents' cultural background. It is when they finally come back to their place of birth that a new beginning becomes possible. And knowledge of who they are and the in-between position to which they belong changes their lives forever.

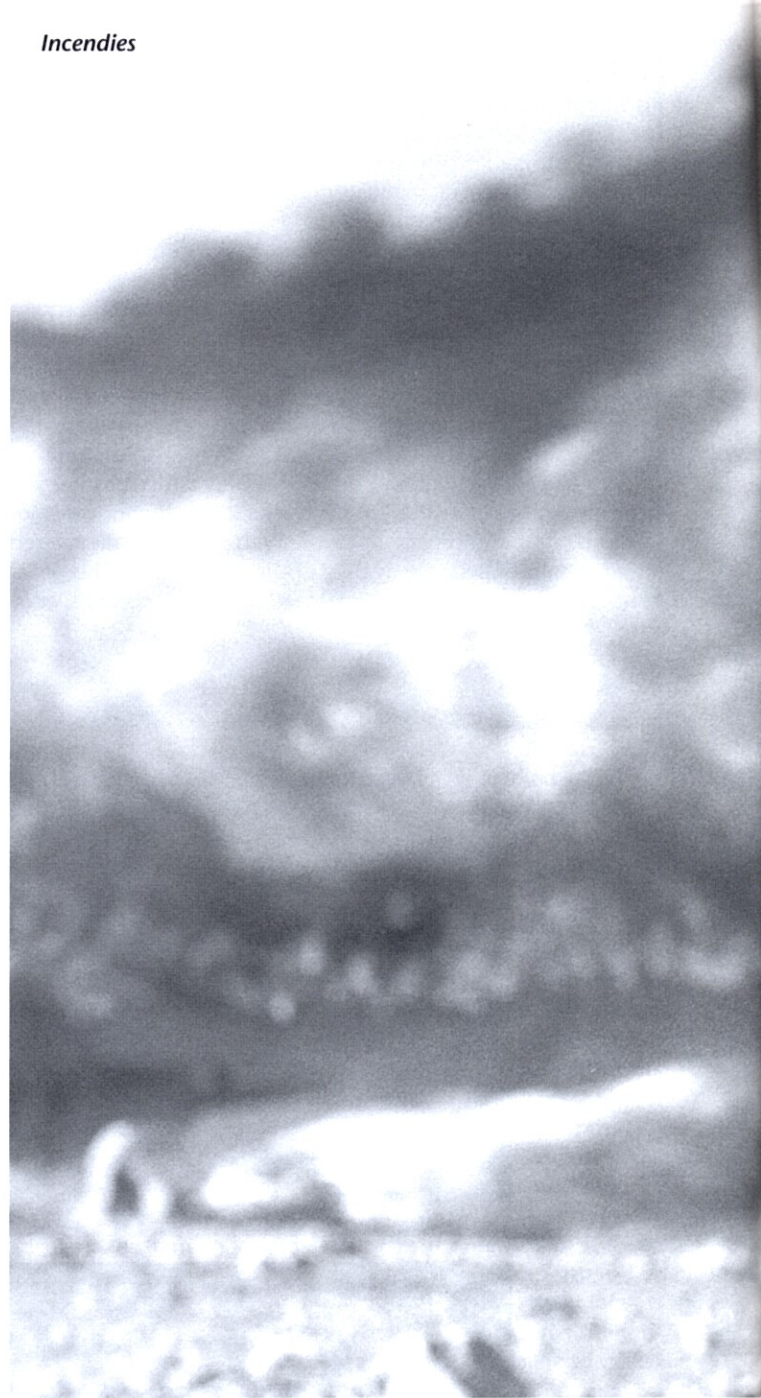
Fatal Wars, Tragic Belongings

In addition to his infatuation with Greek and classical tragedies, Mouawad was inspired by Holderlin's romantic and lyric style in many ways throughout his theatrical career. According to Holderlin's conceptualization of Greek tragedy, *fatum* is a superior power that forces mortals to follow a path they were designed to follow in order to be free. The paradox that emerges from this situation is that when the tragic hero succumbs to his/her fate, he/she has to be punished, and freedom can only be achieved when punishment is accepted. The father in *Littoral* and the mother in *Incendies* are tragic heroes *par excellence*, much like Oedipus, who was designated by fate to become a criminal and who was punished for a crime he did not intend to perpetrate. Their children, like Antigone, bear the heavy legacy of their parents' fate, along with the ethical sense of responsibility and the tragic sense of belonging. Yet, according to Francoise Dastur:

The tragic hero is a being who refuses to see his actions as the effect of destiny alone. He chooses to be responsible for all that he have done, even for what he could in no way have done consciously, because this is the only way for him to have access to the level of an absolute freedom and to identify himself with the *fatum*. But he can do so only by dying one way or another, so that he gains an absolute freedom and at the same time he loses it.¹⁴

Other characters in both films remind us of the Greek tragic hero who "chooses to be responsible": in *Littoral*, Josephine writes all the names of the dead and recites them from village to village. The blind Ulrich calls her Antigone. Amé, the sniper, killed his wounded father during the war thinking he was someone else; his mother knowing that her son killed her husband hangs herself like the queen Jocasta. Amé's narrative, very similar to Nihad/Abou Tarek's¹⁵ testimony in *Incendies* the play

Incendies



(translated into action scenes in the film), is a sincere, disillusioned and cruel account of homicide. No apology is expected from the tragic hero, and no salvation granted to the killer unless he confesses his sins and awaits punishment to free himself from fate, either through the journey (the diasporic dislocation) or through death (the ultimate dislocation).

The crime perpetrated by Mouawad's tragic heroes are war crimes rather than moral ones; torturing and raping an enemy are criminal actions imposed by fate. But unlike the Greek tragedies, these crimes are perpetrated consciously. War is therefore a crime of consciousness, a tragic crime for that matter where fate is perceived as a collective punishment rather than an individual one. Gods are not against those heroes, as



gods are part of the conflict equation; rather the tragic heroes oppose the followers of gods, those who instrumentalize religion to bring destruction and horror. The question remains as to know whether or not it is possible to liberate the collectivity from the responsibility of its own crimes, and Mouawad seems to answer following the classic writers depicted in Thierry Hentsche's *Raconter et mourir*:¹⁶ the only way to free the hero from fate is to narrate war and death, to fight fate by narration. The journey accomplished by all the Antigones in Mouawad's film adaptations (Wahab, Josephine, Jane, Simon) is also a path to freedom, similar to the journey of the diasporic writer who accomplishes his own freedom while crossing physical, national and artistic borders.

The films' approach to the act of crossing back to the homeland is equally tragic; it is neither nostalgic nor apologetic. The characters' belonging to their country of birth is as fatal and violent as their parents' death, as tragic and dreadful as their association with their parents' wars. Therefore Mouawad's characters belong to the history of violence by affiliation and by fate, and their duty is to learn, understand and reconcile. Belonging is therefore an illustration of the necessity of truth, the unavoidability of pain and the need for consolation. Wahab in *Littoral* and the twins in *Incendies* bear the legacy of their familial belonging which has a fatal impact on their lives as much as war had a fatal impact on the parents' existence. What makes the theme of belonging even more poignant is the fact that

most protagonists are deprived of their childhood, as much as their parents were deprived of their love, their youth, their homeland. In *Incendies*, Nawal writes in her will: "Childhood is a knife stuck in the throat. It can't be easily removed."¹⁷ Then again after the will is executed, her son Simon who has grown older and stronger reads in a letter she wrote to him before she died: "Childhood is a knife stuck in your throat and you managed to remove it (...) Now, history must be reconstructed. History is in ruins. Gently, console every shred. Gently, cure every moment; Gently, rock every image."¹⁸ Holderlin's *Hyperion* is the romantic ancestor of this beautiful lyrical language used by Mouawad in his play and transposed in both film adaptations through different devices: voice-over, music, and sometimes sheer silence. In *Incendies'* most powerful scene, Nawal's scream remains silent as she faces the horrible death of a young girl she tries to save from Christian Lebanese gunmen and the burning of a bus full of Muslims trying to flee their village. At the end of the film, Nawal writes to her twin son and daughter: "My love, where does your story begin? At your birth? Then it begins in horror. At your father's birth? Then it is a beautiful love story. I say that your story starts with a promise. The promise to break the silence." Nawal's voice-over accompanies a close-up shot on Jane and Simon's face. By simply using the rack-focus to enhance subsequently the twins' sadness and their tears, the close-up shot suggests a new beginning for the brother and sister tied together by the same fate, within the same frame.

For the characters and the author, origins lie in multiple beginnings, one of which is childhood, others are moments of revelation when truth strikes again like a knife and silence is finally broken. The protagonists discover throughout their journey that as much as their childhood belongs to their family and to their homeland (the Father, and Nawal), their adulthood belongs to the history of war and violence in their country of birth (Wahab, Jane). Mouawad's infatuation with the thematic triangle (War, Death and Truth) situates his work within the Western Christian canon defined by Thierry Hentsch in *Raconter et mourir*.¹⁹ According to Hentsche, the intrinsic link between death and narration is one of the key elements in the Western classical narratives, from the *New Testament* to *The Divine Comedy* and from *Don Quixote* to *Remembrance of Things Past*:

Que nous le voulions ou non, nous sommes d'une civilisation qui liait étroitement la vérité à la mort. La manière qu'avait—qu'a toujours—le christianisme d'établir cette liaison est profondément malheureuse. Mais le rejet de cette croyance ne suffit pas à nous débarrasser du malheur qu'elle a nourri. Nous sommes encore, malgré le déclin de la religion, beaucoup plus chrétiens que nous ne l'imaginons. Mort et vérité demeurent secrètement jumelées, et leur lien invisible traverse toujours nos préoccupations collectives.²⁰

But while death and truth are interconnected, it is legitimate to forsake the historic truth for the benefit of the dramatic and fictional one. Hentsch adds: "Le récit renonce à la vérité. La vérité du récit réside dans sa capacité à faire sens."²¹ Historical incidents in Villeneuve's film bear different meanings: massacres perpetrated by the *Kataeb* (Christian Lebanese militia) in 1982,²² references to the prison of Khiam in South Lebanon held by the South Lebanon Army (SLA) under Israeli rule from 1985 to 2000, and the attempt to assassinate the pro-Israeli SLA leader in 1988 are major incidents briefly hinted at in the

play and extensively shown in the film. After killing the paramilitary leader Chad, Nawal was captured and put into prison in Kfar Rayat. The dramatic and thriller-like incident in film refers to Souha Bechara's attempt to kill the leader of the SLA, Antoine Lahad, in 1988.²³ Despite the direct referencing, Nawal remains an invention of the narrative. Her role is not to incarnate Bechara, but rather to make the assassination succeed in film while it failed in reality, to avenge the tortured, to sing despite the horror of war, to pay back resistance and courage. Her role is to comment on reality and change it on screen while offering a dramatic twist to the plot.

On a totally different level, the connection between tragic death and revealed truth is anchored in Mouawad's consciousness of being *Other* in the philosophical and subjective sense. As a self-centered multicultural artist, Mouawad's artistic references range from the Greek tragedies to the classical masterpieces, and from the oral Arab poetry to the theatrical genius of Robert Lepage. His work is nourished by different languages, including Arabic, different memories including visual reminiscences of his country of birth and reconstructed images of his culture of birth. Hentsche once again makes the connection between Death and Otherness plausible, since both trigger resistance and denial:

La civilisation qui expulse la mort du champ de son questionnement ne veut apparemment rien savoir de ce qui la dérange. L'autre, comme la mort, risque d'y devenir l'objet d'une peur et d'une forclusion indicibles. Derrière la jonction de la vérité et de la mort se profile ainsi la double question de l'identité et de notre rapport au monde.²⁴

Those multiple spaces of belonging created to comfort the *other from within* are the sites where the diasporic playwright negotiates his multiple identities, where he can claim and share references to the Lebanese/Arab identities as well as to the Canadian/Western ones. Beyond the conjunction of Death and Truth highlighted by Hentsche, lies the question of identity (and correlatively of *Otherness*) that contributes in many ways to the construction and the deconstruction of Wahab's and the twins' hyphenated self, as obvious alter ego characters of Mouawad himself.

The consciousness of being *Other* is emphasized, brought to the attention of the living thanks to the dead; and after death the consciousness of being *Other* is accepted through the legacy of the departed that should be preserved and venerated. Ultimately, Mouawad's work tells the same narrative. Being *Other* is the fate of the tragic modern individual (e.g. diasporic, dislocated, nomadic); this individual is punished for the crime of betraying his land of birth and gains his/her freedom by accepting the punishment of nomadicism and dislocation. This neo-tragic hero is therefore sent on a mission and his/her parents' testament reinforces and launches his/her long and informative journey; the testament as a narrative device transforms the journey into a quest, as fulfilling one's destiny becomes the hero's duty imposed on him/her by the law of the dead. The tragic dimension of the journey is epitomized through the return to the land of origins, and the acceptance of this heavy legacy as an inescapable fate and a path to freedom. Wahab finds in his father's letters another self, a double he starts contemplating from the point of view of the father, with the mediation of the written letters, the testimonial narrative: "I spent the night poring over those letters. A lot of them talked about the land, my

parents' homeland, about childhood. Always about the sea, often the sea, with my mother. Sometimes about death, often about love. A lot of love."²⁵ The social as well as the cultural context in which Mouawad's film adaptations are received in Canada and abroad as well as the meta-discourse (e.g. interviews, reviews, prefaces and comments by the author) produced in parallel to the screening of both films take precedence over the intertextual inspiration coming from the Greeks. This tension, one might claim, between the contextual and the intertextual, situates Mouawad's dramas within a rather profane realm where his heroes are neither kings nor gods, but ordinary people trapped in a tragic situation imposed on them by destiny.

. . .

Towards the end of *Incendies*, Nawal is shown in the swimming pool, years after having immigrated to Canada. She sees and recognizes for the first time her son and persecutor Nihad/Abu Tarek. She sits on a chair, while he stands up with a friend, back to her; the distribution of volumes within the frame emphasizes the dominant-dominated relationship, while the fragmented time and space emphasizes the fast and horrifying work of memory. A series of close ups show Nihad's ankle with the three linear dots which were made at his birth, intercut with Nawal's face stunned and frightened. Nihad's shoulders are turned away from his unknown mother who is also his unrecognized victim. The scene starts earlier in the film as a flashback from the daughter's viewpoint. Jane tries to remember the day when the veil of silence was thrown over her mother's life, five years before she died. Unlike the play, which uses Nawal's voice while pleading in an imaginative court of justice against her persecutor and which refers to her silence recorded on audiotapes to which her daughter Jane keeps listening, the film uses the visual silence and the close up as affective devices enhanced by the sounds of the swimming pool and by Jane's voice calling upon her stunned mother in the background. The realistic setting of the swimming pool in the film is a substitute for the imaginative court in the theatre, and a tool of transition that connects Jane in the present winter time after her mother's death, to Jane and her mother in the summer time, years ago, when suddenly the mother stopped talking. The crime is finally personalized and the dichotomy of the beloved son and the hideous persecutor is exposed and negated for the sake of a clear denunciation of war. The ankle with the three dots and the face, fragmented body parts connected by editing, belong to the same person, the son and the persecutor, the beloved and the confused, a beautiful metaphor of a nation in turmoil. One body, one horrifying entity. *Littoral* and *Incendies* reflect on this entity in different ways, from different perspectives. The ultimate goal is to bring together the opposites, to connect the dislocated members, not as One but as Multiple within the One, not in a unifying wide shot but in a fragmented set of close ups. The ultimate goal is to think violence, war, death and fate as sites of inescapable belongings, explored through movement, knowledge and the art of narration.

Notes

1 Friedrich Holderlin: *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, edited by Eric L. Santner (New York: Continuum, 1990). Holderlin (1770-1843) is a German poet and an important thinker in the development of German idealism in the nineteenth century.

- 2 For example in *Littoral* the play, a film director and his crew follow the main character Wahab who imagines that he is a movie actor; the director and the film crew introduce cinema in theatre and allow viewers to identify with the protagonist/film actor, and by the same token, to discover the protagonist's deepest thoughts and fears. The director and his crew disappear from the cinematic adaptation of *Littoral*; they are metaphorically represented by Mouawad himself as a filmmaker behind the camera.
- 3 Mouawad's indebtedness to Greek tragedies is seminal to understand his work as a playwright and film director. He has directed for theatre *Oedipus Rex* in 1998 and in 2011. His biggest project ever is to direct for theatre the nine known plays by Sophocles in three new cycles starting with *Des Femmes (Of Women)* which includes *Electra*, *Antigone* and *Women of Trachis*. *Des Femmes* was touring in Europe from June 2011 to January 2012, and in Canada from April to June 2012. The three proposed cycles do not follow the conventional organization of the plays (e.g. *The Theban Plays*); instead, they bring together characters which are bound by their similar tragic fate. Cf. <http://www.wajdimouawad.fr/spectacles/des-femmes>
- 4 Wajdi Mouawad, *Scorched*. Translated by Linda Gaboriau (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2009): 135. I will reference the English version of the published plays whenever applicable using the English titles, *Tideline* and *Scorched*, as opposed to the original titles of both films, *Littoral* and *Incendies*.
- 5 Wajdi Mouawad, *Tideline*. Translated by Shelley Tepperman (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2010): IV.
- 6 Ibid, V.
- 7 Acclaimed Arab Canadian filmmakers such as Tahani Rached, Jennifer Kawaja, Jayce Salloum, B.H. Yael, and Ruba Nadda largely contributed to Canadian and Quebecois filmmaking in the last thirty years.
- 8 The same name is used in *Littoral* and in *Incendies*; in Arabic, it means "Giver". This name might be considered one of the names of God for Muslims. Wahab/Wilfrid/Wajdi emphasize the playful autobiographical aspect of Mouawad's work on one hand, and its mythical breadth on the other hand.
- 9 In reference to Amin Maalouf's book, *Les identités meurtrières* (Paris: Grasset, 1988).
- 10 Mouawad, *Tideline*, 147.
- 11 See Denis Bachand, "Le prisme identitaire du cinéma québécois. Figures paternelles et interculturelité dans *Mémoires affectives* et *Littoral*." *Cinemas* vol. 19 no 1 (Fall 2008): 65-66.
- 12 Ibid, 70. "Wahab renounces his unique identification in order to protect his multiple belongings, to feel free of citizenship ties, to become plural, adequate, reconciled with his past as well as with his ancestors' past." (my translation).
- 13 Mouawad, *Scorched*, 64.
- 14 Francoise Dastur, "Tragedy and Speculation" in *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. by Miguel de Beistegui, (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2000): 78.
- 15 Nihad/Abu Tarek is seen very briefly in the film either as a child-fighter or as a grown-up adult refugee in Canada.
- 16 Thierry Hentsch, *Raconter et mourir. Aux sources narratives de l'imaginaire occidentale* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2002).
- 17 Mouawad, *Scorched*, 8.
- 18 Ibid, 81.
- 19 Hentsche concludes his book with this adage: "Se raconter, c'est ne pas mourir" (To tell one's story is not to die). Hentsche, *Raconter et mourir*, 402.
- 20 Ibid, 15. "Whether we like it or not, we belong to a civilisation that used to link Truth and Death. The way in which Christianity established—and still does—this link is deeply unfortunate. Yet to reject this belief does not suffice to liberate us from the misfortunes it has nourished. Despite the decline of religion, we are still much more Christian than we imagine. Death and Truth are secretly intertwined and their invisible ties continue to inform our collective preoccupations." (my translation).
- 21 Ibid, 17. "The narrative renounces Truth. The Truth of the narrative resides in its capacity to make sense." (my translation).
- 22 Massacres were perpetrated in the Palestinian refugee camps Sabra and Shatila, near Beirut, when the camps were under Israeli siege.
- 23 Born in 1967 to an Eastern Orthodox family, Bechara has become a Lebanese symbol of resistance. She shot Lahad twice as depicted in the film but did not kill him. Bechara was detained at the famous Israeli prison Khiam from 1988 to 1998 where she was repeatedly and brutally tortured. Israel ran this prison while the SLA provided guards and interrogators. Bechara currently lives in Lebanon.
- 24 Hentsche, *Raconter et Mourir*, 15. "The civilisation which excludes death from its field of investigation does not probably want to know whatever bothers it. The Other, like Death, might become within this context an object of fear and of unspeakable disgrace. Beyond the conjunction of Truth and Death lies the two-fold question of identity and our relationship to the world." (my translation).
- 25 Mouawad, *Tideline*, 15.

Light in Dark Spaces

A REVIEW OF ALLAN SEKULA AND
NOËL BURCH'S FILM ESSAY
THE FORGOTTEN SPACE (2010)

By JILL GLESSING

A striking media trend today is the popularity of the documentary film genre, particularly those that offer social or political critiques. Think of the Canadian film, *The Corporation*, or any of Michael Moore's condemnations of corporate America. Viewers, weary and wary of the usual fare of commercial fictions and the increasingly propagandistic tone of the news media, want alternatives: 'the facts' of documentary filmmaking. The rise of popular protest movements around the world, as responses to globalized neoliberalism and more recent financial crises have further driven the desire for information sources beyond the compromised channels of commercial media. We want to know.

Moreover, filmmakers Allan Sekula and Noël Burch have argued that there is "a need to understand these things in a deeper way than the culture of the popular documentary film, which has opened itself up in good ways to current political problems."¹ Indeed, they wanted to make a more "openly Marxist film...to redeem in the discourse of film the criticality of a Marxist way of looking at the world." Their film-essay, *The Forgotten Space*, was the result. Although well received at its September 2010 Venice premier, where it was awarded the Special Orizzonti Jury Prize, further attention seemed to develop slowly. However, recent screenings at the Tate Modern in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and other venues, have been generating increasing interest. The film's timely production led the filmmakers beyond their initial focus—the technological basis of globalization and its effects on the working classes—to include the deepening current global financial crisis. This has added weight and relevance to the film's Marxist critique of contemporary capitalism.

Collaborative Spaces

After years of discussion, long time friends Allan Sekula and Noël Burch collaborated on *The Forgotten Space*. Burch, a Marxist film critic, filmmaker and American exile in France for most of his life, is best known for his early formalist film analysis in his 1973 book *Theory of Film Practice*.² But Burch's later contribution to film theory considered the development of film conventions within their socio-economic context, particularly

their historical formation within western capitalism. He distinguished between the 'Primitive Mode of Representation' that characterized early film development, and a later 'Institutional Mode of Representation', when film language became codified to correspond to the dominant scopic regime—a spectatorship of control and identification with the camera. Burch also co-founded and directed the alternative French film school, *Institut de Formation Cinématographique*. Despite his reputation as a theorist, Burch considers himself primarily a filmmaker, having directed over twenty films, most of which were experiments in the documentary form that departed from the totalizing space of bourgeois film. Burch's deep, life long engagement with film practice, history, and theory are apparent in his direction of *The Forgotten Space*. Sekula's contribution to the film was mainly conception and writing, although he also provided some independently shot footage.

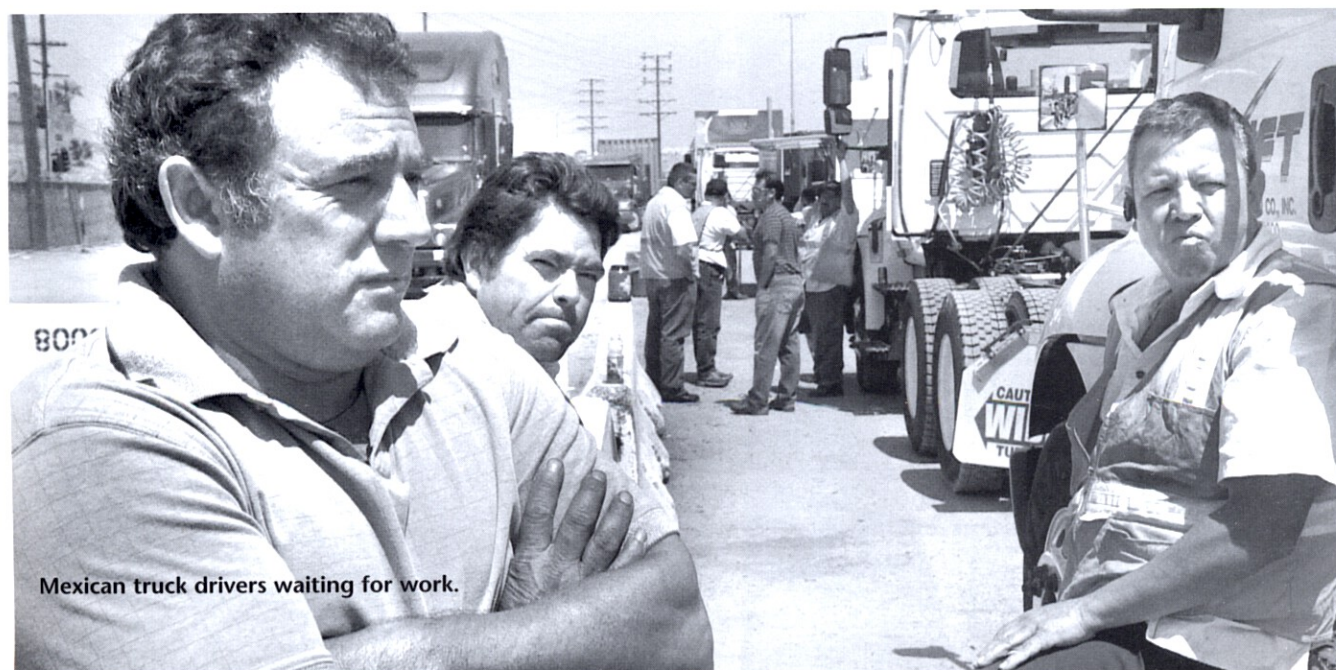
Allan Sekula has also spent much of his career as a scholar and artist, as a photography historian and photography-based mixed media artist. He has taught at the California Institute of the Arts since 1985. Besides sharing Burch's political sympathies, Sekula has also critically examined systems of visual representation, notably in his 1984 book, *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works*.³ There he considers the function of social documentary photography within class and power relations. And like Burch has done in film, Sekula has explored alternative documentary strategies in his respective media of photography and text, specifically through the epistemological and aesthetic lens of 'critical realism'.

Sekula's gallery exhibitions and books have incorporated photographs, slide projection, spoken sound recordings and text panels. His artistic process combines separate narrative elements which he has described as a 'disassembled movie'. This makes his more recent move into film and video seem natural and inevitable. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh considers Sekula's venture into film, after forty years of 'entanglements' with the art establishment, long overdue. Art museums, Buchloh has charged, are not interested in showing representations of labour.⁴ The neglect of this work (and of workers—another 'forbidden space') has been critiqued by Sekula him-

Polish orchard workers at the Betuwe (Netherlands) having lunch.



Outside of Los Angeles

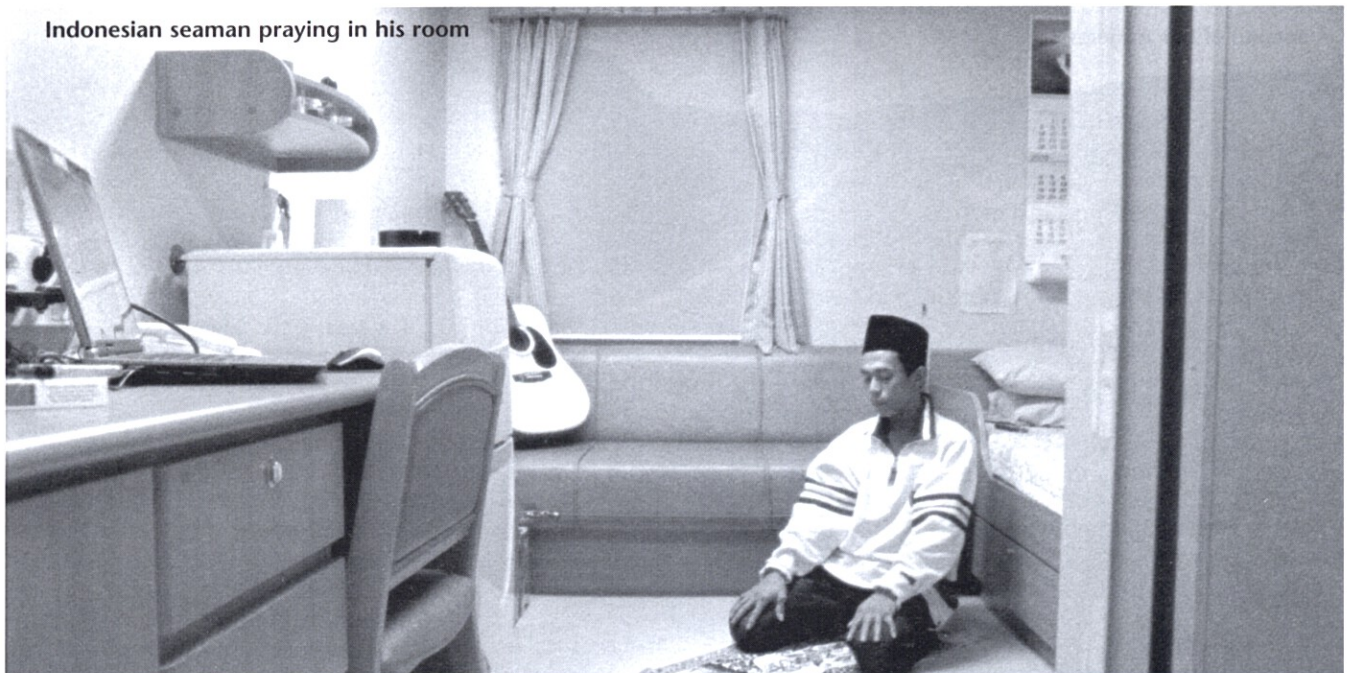


Mexican truck drivers waiting for work.

Container ship at sea



Indonesian seaman praying in his room



Korean seaman



self.⁵ Besides, Buchloh further complains, modern gallery audiences can't read—a serious impediment to appreciating Sekula's text-heavy installations. Whether Sekula's films reach a wider audience than his two-dimensional works is another question. Besides the 'new documentary' film forums such as Toronto's Hot Docs festival where the film screened in 2010, his works remain in specialized venues, such as the museums mentioned above.

Alongside photography and his political commitments, Sekula has long been pre-occupied with the sea, related to his growing up in a working class California port. A series of photo-essays ("TITANIC's wake" [1998-2000], "Tsukiji" [2001] on the Japanese tuna industry, "Dockers' Museum" [2012]), films, ("Lottery of the Sea" [2006], inspired by Adam Smith's linkage of oceanic and economic risk) and installations (the travelling seafaring museum that features his work "Ship of Fools" [2010]), gives testimony to this commitment.

What is also apparent in these linked projects is his cumulative working process. Sailing through connected watery themes and critical perspectives, each piece reworks and builds upon the previous, pushing into new geographies and histories. The grandest of them—the exhibition and book, *Fish Story* (1995)⁶—absorbs an earlier essay, "Dismal Science", titled after the critical term that Thomas Carlyle applied to economics.

Fish Story is thick with references. It's a fish soup of historical allusions and anecdotes that explores the transformations of the contemporary maritime world with the development of capitalism through a vast symbolic and theoretical legacy. Aesthetic approaches to the sea and seafaring are surveyed within the history of painting, literature, and film, and analyzed within the theoretical folds of Engels, Marx, Brecht, Benjamin and Foucault. As with Burch's historical analysis of film language, Sekula identifies changing seascape aesthetics in relation to shifting economic dynamics of imperial conquest and the vast accumulation of the rising capitalist bourgeoisie. Seventeenth-century classical Dutch panoramas are related to the exploration, trade and colonialism of the period, and contrasted with modernist fragmented, dialectical detail of, for example Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Literary works, such as Herman Melville's sea stories of *Billy Budd* and *Moby Dick*, are set against modernist poetry. Sekula insists on framing the dialectical paradoxes: the historic Spanish colonial fortress in Veracruz was made from coral for lack of stone in the region; today, in the same region, disenfranchised Mexicans, unemployed from the changing economics of ports, occupy empty cargo containers.

An important concern in *Fish Story*, present also within *The Forgotten Space* is with the labourers who have toiled in the worst conditions on the sea for the profits of others. Historically, seafarers and dockworkers existed in what Sekula refers to as the 'heterotopic spaces' of sea and port. These social, geographic, and political spaces existed on the margins, outside and resistant to the ordered control of inland societies. The mythological and real reputation of sailors for mutiny and insurgency marked them as socially dangerous. Often the most radical of unionized workers, they were also some of the first workers to fall under the restructuring of postwar American capitalism. Technological innovations on the ships and in the ports coupled with shifting sources of labour power weakened the political and economic power of both ship and dock workers. The transitional image of the seafarer is figured in American popular culture by the cartoon character, Popeye, whose invert-

ed physiognomy of tiny biceps and bulging forearms, and his exemplary consumption of spinach, softened the outsider status of the sailor and the integration of the ports into 'civilized society'.

The Forgotten Space extracts from *Fish Story* only the most practical of these elements—the material technologies and economics of capitalism and their effects on labour and communities. The more aesthetic and theoretical discussions of the text are present in the film, but only suggestive for those familiar with the essay. The softened, late sun shots of ships at port in the film will recall for readers the Claude-Joseph Vernet panoramas and Turner-esque seascapes described in the essay. The film stands on its own, but it is much richer in its cinematic impact and theoretical explorations when set alongside its textual source.

The Forgotten Space of Capitalism

The central concern of *The Forgotten Space* is sourced from *Fish Story*: technological and legal innovations that developed within the context of late capitalism that pivoted around a simple metal box, the now ubiquitous shipping container. The narrator explains the transformative, globalizing impact that these innovations had on workers and communities, the demographics of production, the transport of goods, and the cultural meaning of the sea. The transformation of these conditions and meanings was effected by the adoption by transport industries of the new shipping technologies that equally tamed the unruly agents of nature and labour power.

The filmmakers resist the mythology that globalization rests on a dematerialized cyber-capitalism that obliterates physical boundaries and material spaces. Instead, their position is that globalization is founded on the materiality of the cargo container and the legal fiction of the flag of convenience. Together, these allow for cheap offshore production and the international circulation of capital and commodities. Sekula argues that "[w]ithout a thoroughly modern and sophisticated 'revolution' in ocean-going cargo-handling technology, the global factory would not exist, and globalization would not be a burning issue."⁷ If computer technologies allow information and capital to travel in bits and bytes across borders, global capitalism is still reliant on physical infrastructure supported by millions of (often migrant) workers. But these labour processes and commodity flows are now invisible, existing in the 'forgotten space' of sea transport. This space, for Sekula and Burch, is "still the crucial space of globalization. It is here that the confusion, the violence and the alienation of contemporary capitalism are most evident."⁸

As *The Forgotten Space* outlines, today's intensely global production emerged from a crisis in postwar U.S. capitalism and an effort to maintain profits during a time of increasing labour and resource costs. The transport industries, in order to maintain profits, changed the game plan. Two innovations fundamental to maritime transport—the shipping container and the flag of convenience—were central.

The shipping container emerged in the 1950s. Its steel box frame became internationally standardized, intermodal and automated in loading and unloading. Goods could be transported more cheaply and easily. Labour requirements on both the ships and the docks were greatly reduced. Rather than workers loading individual goods between each transfer point en route to their destination, goods could be loaded directly into containers at the production site and transferred through automation

between intermodal points of trucks, trains and ships. Though ninety percent of goods still travel across the sea, linked rail and trucking systems are important corollaries. Mammoth new train, truck and port systems have been relocating and expanding to accommodate the container, transforming landscapes and villages. Historical ports were revamped to become post-modern tourist destinations (as in Barcelona or New York), while massive container yards were moved to new sites.

Alongside the new docks came new workers. As Sekula and Burch document, with containerization businesses could now exploit migrant workers willing to take low wages for long, hard work, particularly as the new technologies allowed production to be shifted offshore and shipped to home markets more cheaply.

The necessary companion to containerization was the 'flag of convenience', a system of ship registry that allowed shipping companies to register their ships in any country—the rogue jurisdictions of Panama and Liberia being especially popular. This legal mechanism allowed companies to escape troublesome wage and protection regulations for workers of their home countries. The shipping monopolies could choose their crews from among the world's most desperate populations. Together, these two innovations effected maritime transformation and changed the geography of production. The effects are well known: underpaid and overworked workers in unregulated poor countries producing and transporting cheap consumer goods to wealthy countries; and their displaced unemployed cousins in richer countries, left abandoned by corporations in their race to the bottom for the lowest wage.

For Sekula and Burch, the titular 'forgotten space' is the sea and those who work on it. They are both forgotten in their central role in the transportation of consumer and construction goods around the world. The sea is central to the film, but it is but metonym for all else sucked into the vortex of the 'creative destruction' of an increasingly globalized capitalist economic system, ever more tightly linked by the great ports of the world.

Spatial Dislocation: Land and Communities

The film opens up these relations, showing the communities and individuals affected by containerization, focusing on the regions of Belgium, Rotterdam, Hong Kong, Bilbao and Los Angeles.

It is in Belgium that the film begins, in a gloomy scene of displacement, where the 700 year old village of Doel is scheduled for demolition. The port of Antwerp is expanding to become a container port large enough to receive deep-sea ships, which will consume the village land. Opposition to the plan has led to protests, riot police and violence. Among resisters is an elderly shopkeeper who refuses to leave the home he's lived in all his life. Subject to similar dislocation, small farmers near the Dutch city of Rotterdam are losing their farms to the new train system, the Betuweroute. Officials promise that this high-efficiency linkage between their ports and German markets will revitalize the Dutch economy. A historian and a municipal leader interviewed in the film offer rebuttals against this kind of economism that many European governments have been adopting. What is the value of economic progress, they ask, when it destroys the very communities it is meant to help? The farmer and her family are shown in their intimate relation to their land, tending lambs and describing their eviction. A train looms behind them.

This dialectical pairing of opposites is a primary formal strategy of the film: idyllic close-up scenes of harmony in nature and community are followed by wide shots of the destructive

force—a noisy, container-laden train crossing the landscape. It is in the close-ups that the pockets of resistance emerge—cheerful scenes of Polish migrant women picking apples in a Dutch 'garden of Eden'. Tight shots of red apples dangling from trees, backed by the joyous music of a Beethoven Pastoral Symphony, cows grazing in a tranquil green pasture. This farmer will truck his produce to market outside of the new Betuwe rail system. The symphony stops abruptly, the view opens up behind the apples and bright sun; a train snakes behind them, darkening paradise.

The film is full of such examples that show the container's effect on the transportation infrastructure, and its effects on communities. Older ports, though socially marginal and transgressive, were still connected to the urban fabric. But to accommodate the increased imports entering cities via container ships, these ports have been relocated to larger land expanses of industrialized transport hubs. Helicopter shots pan the new Los Angeles container port: now fully separated from the city, it is as vast as a city itself, though an unpeopled one.

Sekula has explained these changes:

"There have been enormous increases in economies of scale. Older transport links, such as the Panama Canal, slide toward obsolescence as ships become more and more gargantuan. Super-ports, pushed far out from the metropolitan center, require vast level tracts for the storage and sorting of containers. The old sheltering deep-water port, with its steep hillsides and its panoramic vistas, is less suited to these new spatial demands than low delta planes that must nonetheless be continually dredged to allow safe passage for the deeper and deeper draft of the new super-ships."⁹

Hong Kong is another region shown in the film that has been affected by containerization. Its status as an important port declined when new ports were built further south, closer to the new Chinese factories. Nostalgic history of seafarers' traditions in hospitality and union halls is recounted by a kindly Irish priest. The Maritimers' Hospitality House he manages now provides accommodation for Indonesians who migrate to work on container ships. Young Chinese who work on casino ships anchored just off shore enjoy a reprieve, using Internet in the lounge. At a military style training school, boys are being primed as labour for the tourist industry that is replacing the transport industry. We watch them learn to make beds, clean toilets, raise flags.

Reconstruction of the Atlantic port of Bilbao is also underway. The port, important since the fourteenth century, still functions, but now outside of central Bilbao. The city has been re-branded as an international cultural center through the construction of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum. The film explains how this reinvention came to be: "In order to establish its autonomy from Madrid, the Basque bourgeoisie makes an alliance with a New York museum that can only survive by exporting its operations." The narration, critical of this foreign intrusion describes it as "a Los Angeles export product, a leviathan of California postmodernity beached on the derelict riverfront of the economically-depressed maritime-industrial capital of the Basques." An urban planning professor speaking in the film suggests that Gehry's fake 'ship', made with titanium bought cheap from a crumbling Soviet Union is a form of cultural imperialism. Bathed in rich sunlight overlooking the



Deserted street in Doel.



Hong Kong stock exchange



Homeless woman living in a tent
beside railroad, Ontario, California

city, the professor makes it clear that the Basque locals are indifferent to the architecture and its contents: "Once they've been in, they would never return." As in other displaced ports, a new economy of land speculation, leisure and expensive residences has trumped the older seaport communities. Sekula wryly observes that the museum "marks the first move in a projected campaign of economic 'revitalization', tied, as one might expect, to land speculation and tourist promotion."

Workers and Ports

For Sekula and Burch, another type of cultural displacement weighs as heavily alongside the changing port structures—depoliticization. When the old ports are displaced, so also are their traditions, values and radical politics they have nurtured:

The old waterfront culture of sailor bars, flophouses, brothels, and ship chandlers gives way either to a depopulated terrain vague or, blessed with the energies of real-estate speculators, to a new artificial maritime space of theme restaurants, aestheticized nautical relics and expensive ocean-view condominiums. As the class character of the port cities changes, the memory of mutiny and rebellion, of intense class struggle by dockers, seafarers, fishermen, and shipyard workers—struggles that were fundamental to the formation of the institutions of social democracy and free trade-unionism—fades from public awareness. What tourist in today's Amsterdam is drawn to the old monument commemorating dock-workers' heroic but futile strike to prevent the Nazi deportation of the Dutch Jews?

The disappearance of labour history is closely connected to what is, in fact, most important in the film: the impact of containerization on the workers themselves—the newly employed and unemployed, the overworked and under-waged, and the migrant. Some of the most desperate of them are Filipino and Indonesian nationals, accepting lonely separations from their families to work on container ships. The dislocation and alienation of these workers' lives is juxtaposed against the goods they transport. Refrigerated containers of fish caught in northern waters are shipped to China for processing, then delivered to first-world tables; lone workers move in and out of doorways through empty ship hallways; in antiseptic cafeterias of the massive ships, Indonesian workers (who have never set foot in the U.S.) eat California rice, unable to communicate with Korean co-workers. On land, at the Chinese factories, throngs of young people pass through guarded gates, to spend solitary hours of drudgery.

The economic crisis has deepened the cleavage between rich and poor, evidenced in the goods produced here, either cheap, low quality goods for Walmart shoppers or high-quality brands for the wealthy. In his narration, Sekula deadpans in the melancholy, poetic manner of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*: "(T)he center drops out of the market. Goods for the poor, goods for the rich. There's no one in the middle." Filipino nannies gather in the hundreds outside a Hong Kong bank, sharing their day of rest playing cards, reading, sleeping. One of the women, after describing the impossible conditions she escaped from, and her work caring for others' children far away from home, utters a haunting echo of all the other struggling souls we meet in this film: "It's as if there's no progress, no progress at all."

Across the world from, but parallel to, these new bad jobs in China are the new bad jobs of Mexican immigrants in California, whose 'independent' trucking jobs award them, after their costs, \$3.76 an hour. The drivers discuss other truckers who were killed or maimed when automated containers fell on them. Because they were 'self-employed' and non-unionized, no compensation or assistance was given to them or their families.

The Asian and Mexican workers begin to seem well off when the film turns to the unemployed Americans living in a California tent city. In conventional documentary style, they offer their poignant monologues to the camera, struggling to explain their lives of chronic poverty. An ex-contractor, long unemployed, laments the absence of government programs that might help him. He implores the faceless camera: "If I did get a job, how could I eat, bathe, sleep before I got my first pay cheque?"

These representations of unemployed Californians may remind viewers of Dorothea Lange's Depression-era photographs of migrant sharecroppers in the same region, victims of an earlier capitalist crisis. The images were intended to give hope to the struggling population in the grip of economic depression and mass unemployment, and to help prod New Deal stimulus policies through Congress. The images are often closed, static, aesthetically composed presentations of voiceless victims who express only what the photographer or the government agency using them decides. The subjects in *The Forgotten Space*, in their alienation, their hopelessness, and their freedom to speak directly to the camera, stand only as indictment against their own government, for rigging the system, and then abandoning them.

Subduing The Seas

Although the human costs of a free-range capitalist mandate are central in this film, it is also concerned with the state of the sea itself. As the mutinous sea workers were subdued, so too was the sea. No longer is the sea a romanticised site of disaster, as depicted in pre-industrial shipwreck scenes. To exploit the sea for financial or territorial conquest then was to risk destruction. In a modern inversion, the monolithic container ships have rationalized the sea into a flat submissive surface. Powerful ships glide effortlessly on linear course, propelled by fuel kept flowing by distant wars, toward homogenous automated ports dispersing goods to mass, anonymous markets. Adam Smith's risk has been managed.

The film asks us to consider the container's meaning in relation to its aesthetic form. The abstract geometry of the steel box is orderly, anonymous, odourless, hiding its real contents, rationalizing the life and labour it contains. Sekula wryly conflates the containers' meaning: they are "coffins of remote labour power, carrying goods manufactured somewhere else, by invisible workers on the other side of the globe", looking like "stacks of bank notes".

In another modern inversion, the sublime Romantic sea is set up against the awesome power of capitalism. Container ships and oil tankers threaten what is now a delicate ecosystem. Ships use the dirtiest, low-grade fuel possible, shown in the film being washed and swept into an acidifying sea. A clean-up after a major oil spill off the Galician coast shows another instance of society coping with corporate abuses. The Spanish government fails to provide equipment to help the coastal communities; footage shows villagers removing the oil from the sea and sea life with their hands.

The Pandora's Box of Capitalism

The different moments of the film are punctuated periodically by one dramatic image; the massive cargo ship, loaded with coloured containers. The film always comes back to this image; boat and boxes, framed by blue-grey sea.

The thesis that floats through this film-essay is this deadly abstract box. Though the film may seem like a loosely woven tapestry, or collage, the steel box remains the structural device around which all other elements are gathered. Sekula's narration holds it all together, creating the film's 'essayistic' quality. His voice, in turn poetic, morose, satiric and biting, provides explanations and critique throughout.

Formal Spaces

While most of the socio-historical content comes from Sekula's research, Burch's experience and contribution are seen in the film form.

Conventional descriptive documentary is combined with monologues where interviewees speak to invisible cameras, and shots of groups of people gathering and working. The film playfully splices in library shots and news footage, such as protests in Antwerp, and includes or references film history. Josef von Sternberg's 1929 film, "The Salvation Hunters", set in the Los Angeles port, is approvingly noted by Sekula as "the best of the countless films made here because it took the making of the port seriously and not as something given, mere salty atmosphere for dramatic deeds." Updating the sense of danger created by the Lumière Brothers' early film, "Arrival of a Train at a Station" (1896), a Betuwe line train speeds toward the viewer. Editing techniques also reference film history: a diagonal cross dissolve recalls Bilbao's seafaring past as the shining Guggenheim is gradually erased by a real working port; iris wipes self-referentially bring attention to the formal language of film; frequent montage sequences that alternate between wide and tight shots propel the film's polemic narrative.

Both Burch and Sekula engage critically with the documentary form, and *The Forgotten Space* is clearly set within this context. For example, Sekula has explicitly adopted the dialectical approach of 'critical realism'. Critical realism mediates between two opposing views of representation. Images represent the empirical reality of appearances and yet all representations are constructed within cultural systems. Sekula defends and affirms realism, and disparages contemporary art's rejection of realism for ironic stagings. But, he has also been critical of 'social reform' photography for its pretense of objectivity. Burch and Sekula, in the formation of their positions on art and representation, carry the influence of Marx, the Russian Constructivists, Brecht, and Benjamin. The reality then, presented in *The Forgotten Space*, needs to be seen within these artistic and theoretical stances. It is developed out of the relations between the filmmakers, their cameras, the real subjects and conditions, and the political imperatives that structure them.

In addition to these visual features, the music contributes significantly to the tone of the film, setting alternating moods from gloomy and eerie to jaunty and spirited. Dutch composer, Louis Andriessen's segments of "Odysseus' Women" provide brief, but ominous moments. In contrast, the Italian accordionist Riccardo Tesi, whose improvised score is based on his revival of maritime folk traditions, recuperates all to joyful life. Tesi's spirited sounds dominate the soundtrack, replenishing a seafaring history debased by contemporary commerce.

Although there is much cause for despair in the 'dismal sci-

ence' presented here, the film offers an overall sense of hope. The lively accordion music closes the film, while a camera assistant vigorously polishes the lens that we see her through, credits rolling over her. The production process is foregrounded, and we are metaphorically allowed to see more clearly that it is our own labour that creates the world and the images we live in.

There are moments in the film that clearly suggest resistance and change. The Chinese political economist Minqi Li remarks in the film that in time, Chinese workers, too, will also refuse their current conditions of exploitation, as did Europeans in an earlier period. Recent strikes in Shanghai suggest that this might be beginning. Li asks: "So then where will capitalism go?" It may just be a matter of time before capitalism runs out of geographies and populations to exploit. The Mexican truck drivers in the film are shown attending workshops led by union organizers (whose activism at west coast ports allied with the Occupy movement over last year).

The filmmakers have commented on their political goals with this film. Sekula has written that Burch "hoped the film could 'be completed by other means, and of necessity it would have to be completed by different means.' He meant by self-organized political means on the part of the people. The sea has often been thought of as recuperative; that more and more dockers and working people are insisting on not being moved on or not being swept away by the forces of efficiency and rationalisation gives me grounds for optimism."¹⁰ Indeed, the film was embraced by both the *indignados* who visited a gallery screening in Barcelona, and the Oakland, California Occupiers who planned their own screening of the film on blocked off streets.

The myth of Pandora's box is a prominent motif in the film, relating to the cargo container. A clip from Robert Aldrich's 1955 film, *Kiss Me Deadly*, is used to express the ambiguous potential hidden inside the colourful steel boxes. In the scene, the female character slowly opens a box that glows from the inside; what follows is the unleashing of a nuclear-like explosion. In the ancient myth, Pandora's curiosity led her to open the locked box. Before she could close it again, all the evil and destruction in the world had been unleashed. But there was one final thing that remained in the bottom of the box, and this was hope. According to Marx, capitalism is destined to exhaust itself under the weight of its contradictions and a new world of democratic equality would begin. For Sekula and Burch, this promise is the final gift in the bottom of the box, and the final word in the film: "The last gift to remain safely in Pandora's box after evils have been unleashed upon the world is hope."

Notes

- 1 Public platform of "Foreclosed: Between Crisis and Possibility", a screening of "The Forgotten Space" (2010), and a conversation between Benjamin Buchloh, David Harvey, and Allan Sekula, in the Rose Auditorium The Cooper Union, New York May 15, 2011 <http://vimeo.com/24394711>
- 2 Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Praeger, 1973)
- 3 Allan Sekula, *Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-83* (1984)
- 4 "Foreclosed: Between Crisis and Possibility": a conversation between Benjamin Buchloh, David Harvey, and Allan Sekula, Rose Auditorium The Cooper Union, New York May 15, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/24394711>
- 5 An example of his views on the subject of realism and art is found in Allan Sekula, *Condé and Beveridge: Class Works*, Edited by Dr. Bruce Barber (Halifax: NSCAD Press, 2008)
- 6 Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1995)
- 7 Allan Sekula, "Notes for a Film", Notes on The Forgotten Space", <http://www.theforgottenspace.net/static/notes.html>
- 8 *ibid*
- 9 *ibid*
- 10 Allan Sekula, quoted in "Allan Sekula: filming the forgotten resistance at sea", *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2012/apr/20/allan-sekula-resistance-at-sea>

The Thinking Queer's Pornographer

BRUCE LABRUCE, ART/PORN
AND THE POLITICS OF
CO-OPTATION

By JASMINE MCGOWAN

Published late last year by Italian distribution group Atlantide Entertainment and their subsidiary, Queer Frame, *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION* is the first monograph dedicated to the work of Canadian filmmaker and artist Bruce LaBruce. The book is predominately pictorial, and is nothing if not comprehensive; it includes over one hundred high definition color and black and white images gleaned from the abundant image bank of a career spanning almost three decades. Film stills feature throughout, but in no way do they dominate. Images from LaBruce and G.B. Jones' Queercore 'zine, *J.D.s*, appear alongside selections from LaBruce's photographic archive in both its 'art' and 'fashion' modes (though of course it is questionable whether these modes are ever separate in LaBruce's work), as well as a small selection of stills from his stage plays. Editors Cosimo Santoro and Giuseppe Savoca preface the collection with two essays (published in both Italian and English) and conclude the book with twenty pages of biographical information indexing the vast body of work either produced by, or involving, LaBruce. An inventory of feature films and stage plays providing detailed production information, cast lists and full synopses is followed by multiple indices detailing all LaBruce's creative output, organized by his varied modes of engagement with his practice: as film director, script writer, actor, producer, artist, as theatre director and as himself. The final two listings detail the mass of literature pertaining to LaBruce's work. The first, titled "Selected Publications and Reviews", cites twenty-one articles sourced from art journals, fashion magazines, broadsheets and online magazines, and is, as the title suggests, merely a 'selection' from the vast number of reviews and articles about LaBruce that proliferate in both mass and queer subcultural media. The final index, "Publications by the Artist", has thirteen citations, some of which detail extended periods during which LaBruce was a regular contributor to publications such as *Exclaim! Magazine*, *Index* and *Vice* (to which he presently contributes). This list includes his two books, *The Reluctant Pornographer* (1997) and *Ride, Queer, Ride* (1998), as well as pieces written for *Butt* magazine and *Blackbook*.

The release of this monograph suggests the arrival of a long overdue moment of critical attention directed at LaBruce's career and its artistic, activist and theoretical contexts. 2011 also saw the appearance of *The Advocate for*

Fagdom (Angélique Bosio) on the film festival circuit, a 'talking heads' documentary with a similar historicizing and synthesizing tone to *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION*. Despite the lack of any sustained critical attention until this moment, the coincidence of these two texts suggests the existence of an audience who recognize LaBruce as an enduring artist and welcome a critical appraisal and acknowledgement of his body of work.

Bruce LaBruce enjoys a strong presence among (radical) queer subcultures across North America, Canada and Europe, and within these contexts, his legacy as a co-founder of queercore and his ongoing influence on a new generation of radical, queer and independent art-makers is acknowledged. *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION* is significant because it represents the first occasion in which LaBruce's longevity and his significance as a queer cultural figure have been recognized in the form of a comprehensive retrospective of his work. The effect of the monograph, emboldened by the simultaneity of the documentary, represents a sort of *writing into* the history of radical queer art and activism; in this sense, the publication of *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION* is an important and culturally significant moment in the trajectory of LaBruce's ongoing critical project. It also begs the question: what is the impact of this form of official canonization on the (radical, fringe, subcultural) artist and his work?

Despite the obvious thoroughness of the editors, there are a number of bibliographic omissions pertaining to LaBruce's own written work that I would like to briefly acknowledge, as I believe these speak to a larger thematic absence in both the monograph under review as well as the broader discussion of LaBruce. The index entitled "Publications by the Artist" does not list any of LaBruce's published writing prior to his emergence as a feature filmmaker in 1991. In 1985, LaBruce joined the *CineAction* collective at York University in Toronto, and between 1985 and 1990 (the time at which his name disappears from the collective), he made fourteen scholarly contributions to the journal. LaBruce's essays were exercises in the activist-inflected film criticism that was the imperative of the new journal and they explored a variety of topics including the radical potential of the deployment of punk motifs at the level of film form,¹ the politics of gay representation in the age of HIV/AIDS,² and the transgressive potential of what LaBruce identified as 'intelligent porn'.³ It is clear even from this very truncated sample that a number of the concerns emerging out of this period in LaBruce's development as an artist have remained central to his practice as a filmmaker and, therefore, that the inclusion of this material in the purview of the artist's oeuvre could be potentially illuminating.

Two separate but related explanations for the omission of this material from the monograph suggest themselves. The first is that while he was writing for *CineAction*, LaBruce wrote under his birth name, Bryan Bruce. It was during this same period—1985–1990—that Bryan Bruce and collaborator G.B. Jones inaugurated the queercore movement by publishing queer punk fanzine *J.D.s*. Bruce's *nom de plume* in *J.D.s*, and indeed his larger persona within the subcultural realm of queercore, was 'Bruce LaBruce'; it wasn't until he left the *CineAction* collective in 1990 and emerged as a feature filmmaker in 1991, that he became known exclusively by this moniker. Images from *J.D.s* are included in the monograph, and Santoro, in the first of the two introductory essays, particularly emphasizes the significance of LaBruce's punk and queercore roots. In this light, the exclusion of Bryan Bruce's

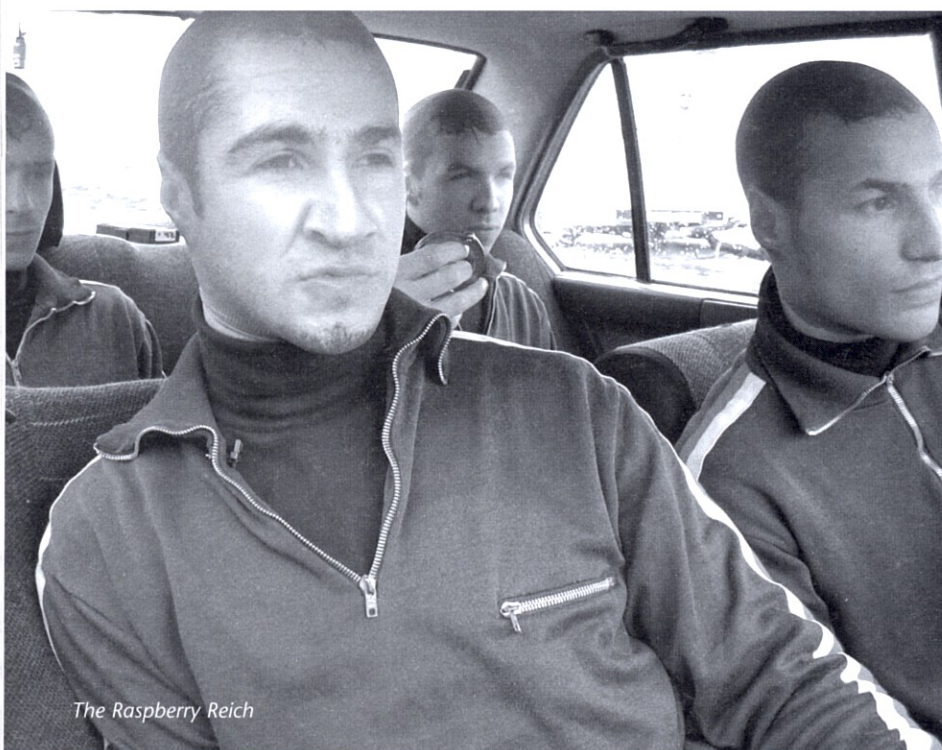


scholarly works from the monograph might be read as a delineation between the artist and his former self, between Bruce the graduate student and LaBruce the phenomenon. "Publications by the Artist" thus signifies exactly that: works published by Bruce LaBruce.

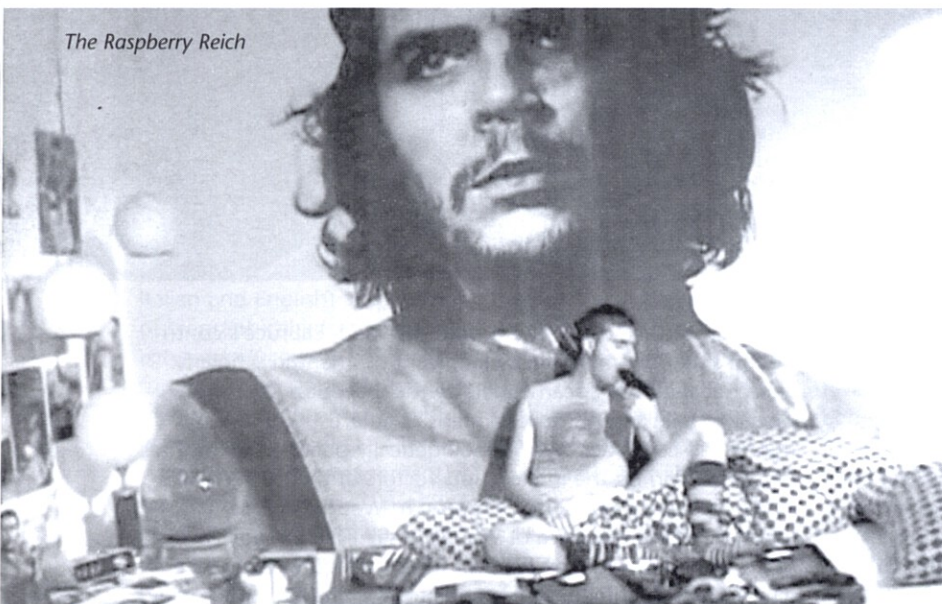
There is, however, an inconsistency with this line of rationalization, and it speaks to what I suggest may be an alternative reason for the omission of the *CineAction* essays. In 1995 LaBruce published a short essay about his involvement with fanzine culture in the edited collection *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men, and Popular Culture*;⁴ in 2005 he wrote the foreword to Thomas Waugh's compendium *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*;⁵ and, in 2007, he contributed to a journal anthology paying tribute to the work of Robin Wood, his former supervisor and mentor.⁶ All of these publications are credited to Bruce LaBruce, yet none of them are listed in *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION*'s "Publications by the Artist" index. While the index detailing written works about LaBruce features the qualification 'Selected' in the title, the index of works by the artist himself features no such caveat, leading the reader to the erroneous conclusion that the index is comprehensive. Moreover, the works excluded from this index are not arbitrarily linked; all three indicate LaBruce's continuing involvement with and contribution to, scholarly discourse.

Especially in the case of the tribute to Wood, LaBruce's contribution situates him within a significant moment in scholarly and critical history spearheaded by the inception of *CineAction*, linking his development as an artist with a tradition of self-conscious and unapologetically politicized film theory. Reflecting on the intersecting vectors of theory and political and personal praxis in his tribute to Wood, LaBruce emphasizes the influence of Wood's essay "The Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic"⁷ on his own ethical practice as a queer filmmaker, a sentiment that affirms the significance of his early years as a film scholar and the continuing influence of theory to his practice. The consequence of these omissions is a downplaying of the role critical film and cultural theory has played in the formation of both LaBruce's idiosyncratic style as a filmmaker, and his thematic concerns.

Given the otherwise faultless accuracy and thoroughness of the monograph, it seems unlikely that the exclusion of these bibliographic details is the result of an oversight, just as it is correspondingly unlikely that the thematic connection between the excluded materials is coincidental. The omission of LaBruce's scholarly articles suggests a reluctance to engage with LaBruce as a scholar and the role this identity might play in the production, reception and interpretation of his work. I should be clear that I don't draw out this observation as a rationale for damning *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION* but rather as a



The Raspberry Reich



The Raspberry Reich

reflection of the broader lack of scholarly attention given to LaBruce as artist and writer. The portrait the monograph paints of LaBruce and his work in fact very accurately reflects the current archive of both film theory and queer cultural criticism, in which an acknowledgment of both his scholarly work and his filmic oeuvre is almost entirely nonexistent.

American academic Eugenie Brinkema is, to date, the only cultural critic who has undertaken a sustained study of LaBruce's oeuvre, (2006).⁸ Conscious that she was writing the proto-theoretical work on LaBruce, Brinkema was motivated by the desire to both interrogate and explain the baffling absence of academic literature on LaBruce. Arguing that LaBruce's idiosyncratic and deliberate conflation of art cinema and pornography problematizes the enduring cultural fantasy

of 'non-contagion' between art and porn, Brinkema argues that LaBruce's absence from film scholarship can be understood as a "hysterical symptom that results directly from the nature of his formal expression."⁹ Genre theory, she concludes, through a process of perpetual displacement, can only render texts that strike such a precarious balance between art and porn as perpetually elsewhere; the failure to write LaBruce's work into the history of queer film scholarship thus becomes an indictment on the nature of 'cinematic knowledge' itself.¹⁰

According to Brinkema, the formal excess of LaBruce's films is the result of a deliberate strategy, and contemporary film discourse cannot accommodate this excess. Though the scholarly neglect of LaBruce's work is doubtless due *in part* to a failure on behalf of contemporary cinematic knowledge, the extent to which it may also be symptom of LaBruce's own design—one deployed to avoid the implications of mainstream cooptation—certainly deserves further theoretical exploration. Brinkema calls for a consideration of these issues at the end of her essay. The release of a monograph as comprehensive as *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION* has the effect of drawing attention to this theoretical lacuna and I think accentuates the need for precisely such a study. The size of the monograph attests to LaBruce's highly generative and sustained career and begs the question as to how exactly he has remained "off the radar" of scholarly film criticism for so long. Though LaBruce can count New Queer directors Todd Haynes, Gregg Araki and Rose Troche, among others, as his contemporaries, he has not enjoyed a modicum of the critical and scholarly attention conferred upon these figures. LaBruce's prolonged evasion of cooptation, including his ability to elude academic inquiry make him, ironically, an ideal subject for queer film criticism. His enduring ability to remain at the nadir of culture makes him the radial queer filmmaker par excellence, and I would speculate that this talent is in fact intimately nurtured and enabled by his formative

and ongoing engagement with Marxist, feminist and queer cultural critiques.

It is evident when viewing the chronological re-presentation of work in *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION*, that LaBruce's marginality has been strategically maintained by his self conscious manipulation of that most historical and contingent of categories—the obscene.¹¹ As both Santoro and Savoca stress in their introductory essays LaBruce's connection to the obscene is motivated by his enduring commitment to punk philosophy, and his 'need to challenge the status quo'.¹² Santoro traces this impulse through LaBruce's well-documented dissatisfaction with both the 'conformist behavior and...conservative values' of the gay movement in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in North America and Canada, and the burgeoning



L.A. Zombie

machismo—and its attendant sexism and homophobia—of the neo-punk scene in the 80s.¹³ *J.D.s* was initiated as a reparative to the encroachment of sexual conservatism into punk and gay culture: its homoeroticization of the male punk coupled with its privileging of the feminine gaze inverted the prevailing structure of the punk scene at the time whilst drawing attention to the creeping conservatism of the gay movement. The editors track the continuation of these themes throughout LaBruce's oeuvre, pausing to emphasize the significance of *The Raspberry Reich* (2004) and its clever recuperation of the trope of sexual revolution, as well as LaBruce's recent turn to zombie porn, and the way in which the films, *Otto; or, Up With Dead People* (2008) and *L.A. Zombie* (2010), invert the homophobic tropes of disease and contagion to offer a radical recalibration of sexual revolution.

LaBruce's work exhibits a persistent and almost prescient ability to consider and symbolically resolve threats to the enduring radicalism of queer, a tendency that is clearly reflected in this publication. *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION* is a comprehensive and beautifully produced monograph that is a fitting tribute to the artist, and a welcome, if not overdue, contribution to prevailing knowledge on Bruce LaBruce.

Notes

1 Bruce, Bryan. 1985. "Rap/Punk/Hollywood: Beat Street and Out of the Blue." *CineAction* (1): 6–11.

- 2 Bruce, Bryan. 1988. "Modern Diseases: Gay Self-Representation in the Age of AIDS." *CineAction* (15): 29–38.
- 3 LaBruce, Bruce. 1987. "Whipping It Up: Gay Sex in Film and Video." *CineAction* (10): 38–44.
- 4 LaBruce, Bruce. 1995. "The Wild, Wild World of Fanzines: Notes from a Reluctant Pornographer." In *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men, and Popular Culture, 197–208*. London, New York: Routledge.
- 5 Waugh, Thomas. 2006. *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*. Carleton University Press.
- 6 LaBruce, Bruce. 2007. "A Tribute to Robin Wood." *CineAction* (71): 25–26.
- 7 Wood, R. 1978. "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic." *Film Comment* 14 (1): 12–17.
- 8 Brinkema's study takes the form of a long essay and discusses each of LaBruce's feature films up to and including *The Raspberry Reich* (Brinkema, Eugenie. 2006. "A Title Does Not Ask, but Demands That You Make a Choice: On the Otherwise Films of Bruce LaBruce." *Criticism* 48 (1): 95–126). It should also be noted that Thomas Waugh has written on LaBruce, making numerous mentions of his work in his larger analysis of transgressive cinema in Canada (book cited above).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 LaBruce's most recent art exhibition, a collection of photography brazenly entitled *OBSCENITY*, foregrounds his longstanding and reflexive relationship with this cultural category. The works depict various religious figures in eroticized poses, betraying the ecstasy of the saints' sublimated sexuality and, according to LaBruce, illustrating the 'holy convergence of the sacred and the profane' ("Wondering... Don't Get Your Rosaries in a Bunch, Madrid—Part II | VICE." *Vice*. <http://www.vice.com/read/wondering-dont-get-your-rosaries-in-a-bunch-madrid-part-ii>). *OBSCENITY* opened in Madrid on the 15th of February 2012 and is not included in *BRUCE(X)PLOITATION*.
- 12 Santoro, Cosimo, and Giuseppe Savoca. 2011. *Bruce(x)ploitation*. Italy: Atlante Entertainment—Queer Frame, p. 9.
- 13 Ibid.

Shorts at the Sofia International Film Festival, Bulgaria

By ALISON FRANK

The Jameson Award for short films used to be given at a number of festivals worldwide; today, it is unique to the Sofia International Film Festival (SIFF). The award, now in its 10th year, is given to one of twelve finalists, all short films up to 25 minutes long, all by Bulgarian directors.

The Jameson Award has had a positive impact on a number of levels. First of all, it puts a spotlight on short film: with a total of just 10 awards at SIFF, it is significant that one of them goes to a short. Second, being part of a relatively restricted shortlist of twelve means that all of the finalists will gain exposure from the award, not just the winner. The festival organisers promote short films further by showing them on their own, ahead of the screenings of features in competition: this means that more people are likely to see the short films than if they had been shown all together in one or two special programmes (the more common way for festivals to deal with shorts). It is also significant that the award considers only Bulgarian shorts: in this way, the Jameson Award showcases the predominantly young, up-and-coming talent of a country that is under-represented in world cinema. Finally, because of the financial might of its sponsor, the Jameson Award is able to offer the most generous prize in the festival (€6000); by way of comparison, the festival's own Grand Prix for best feature is only €5000. The value of the award helps to raise the profile of short films, but more importantly, it is a sum that the winner will be able to put towards their next film, perhaps a first feature. The winner will also gain distinction as an award-winning director, which should help to secure further funding.

As someone who firmly believes in reinstating the short film screening that traditionally preceded any feature, I was delighted to see this approach revived at SIFF. Before almost every feature in competition, a brand new Bulgarian short film acted as an appetiser, its concentrated format offering a pleasing counterpoint to the longer film that followed. With very few exceptions, the shorts were excellent: engaging topics, inventive aesthetics, a balance of humour and pathos, leaving the audience wishing the film could have been longer, and feeling sorry to lose the characters so soon.

I was able to see eight of the twelve shorts in competition: four documentaries, and four fiction shorts. Among the documentaries, the most unusual in its topic was Anton Partalev's *In Step with the Time*: it told the story of the creative vandalism of a Soviet-era public monument in Sofia. Feeling that the sculpture was no longer relevant, a group of students went out at night and turned a frieze of communist icons into American comic book superheroes. A representative from Sofia's Russian Association was not amused, and said that they could at least

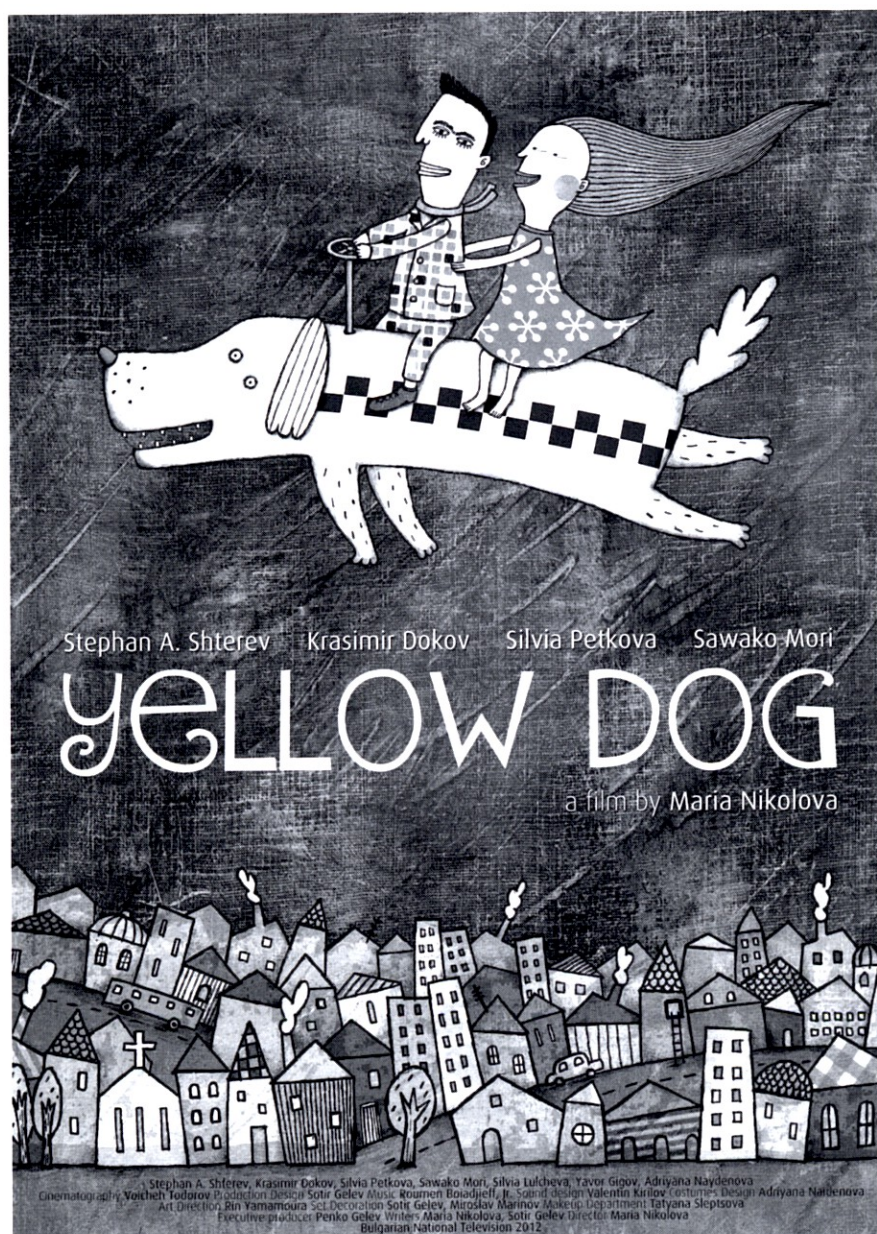
have painted them as Russian comic book heroes...

Vladimir Andonov's *Oleg Tiankov: The Painter Indeed* was another art-themed documentary, but the weakest of the shorts I saw: it was not clear whether the audience was meant to laugh at this earnest artist, or actually admire his work. Much clearer in its message and more relevant was *Seeing You* by Stefan Krastev, Yana Bhurer Tavanier and Andrey Getov, which focused on people with mental difficulties, including a young autistic man who still lives at home. His mother explained that she does her best to encourage his integration, so that the locals, rather than avoiding him, make him feel like part of the community. Attitudes towards the disabled continue to be an important theme in former Communist Bloc countries: older people in particular are not used to seeing mentally or physically disabled people, as the disabled used to be hidden away, either at home or in institutions. The mother in *Seeing You* offers a hopeful vision of the future, noting that children are the best at accepting her son as he is.

The most effective of the documentaries was *Reserve "Northwest."* When introducing the film, director Plamen Nikolov said that he had had over two hundred hours of footage to work with, which he distilled into a film of 25 minutes. Proof of Nikolov's skill as an editor, the resulting film is so engaging that it feels even shorter than it is. Its theme is the gradual disappearance of village life in north-west Bulgaria, a subject which carries great risk of nostalgia and cliché. Nikolov's carefully selected highlights of rural life balance the humour of colourful characters with the pathos of a social group under threat. He introduces a tanned, lithe man of about 60 who recounts that he was jailed for three years for re-appropriating a stolen rabbit, and how that jail time ruined his job prospects. His story of injustice, already with an element of the absurd in the rabbit, is further lightened by glimpses of his current lifestyle, reminiscent of Sacha Baron-Cohen's character 'Borat': the man shares his photo album, which features portraits of him alongside an anonymous woman's gigantic breasts. He then demonstrates his tree-climbing abilities, his bare bottom hanging out of his underwear as he shimmies up the trunk of an ancient evergreen. The film later offers a moving contrast in the form of a poetic old gentleman who recalls the day he left his village: other villagers rallied round like extended family giving him provisions for his trip, while his father told him, 'however big you may become in the wider world, you can always come back to the village to feel small again.' It is rare to find a film, let alone one in such a restricted format, that offers such supreme examples of the ridiculous and the sublime.

The winner of the Jameson Short Film Award was a fiction film about an under-aged woman picked up in a bar by the police. *Morning* (dir. Neda Morfova) begins at the station, where the girl wearily waits for the police to get in touch with her mother who is out of town. The policeman finally gives up and decides to bend the rules by driving the young woman home himself. Though young and good-looking, he maintains a fatherly attitude towards the young woman, and during the short journey they come to understand each other better. With very natural performances, and a storyline that prefers realism to the sensational, this was a strong film, but not as original or memorable as some of the other shorts I saw.

My personal favourites, along with the documentary *'Reserve "Northwest,"* were Ivaylo Markov's *Going to Italy* and Maria Nikolova's *Yellow Dog*. *Going to Italy* was set in a poor Roma



shanty town, and focused on a Balkan band offered the chance to perform in Italy. One of the band's youngest members, a boy of about ten, is the most excited about the trip: the film opens with him racing home to tell his parents the news, while the film's credits are printed on the street signs and bits of garbage he passes on the way. Mum and Dad are dubious that the trip will go ahead, and sure enough, the band's leader encounters a problem: the Italian organiser calls and says that it is too expensive to insure the youngest band members, who will have to stay home. The film blends the energy of Emir Kusturica with a cleaner, less grotesque image of Roma life. Some humorous moments do highlight the rough-and-ready nature of the community: a horse is used to pull the band's tour van out of the village, for example. At the same time, there are moments of

sincere pathos: the little boy's face when he learns that he will be excluded from the trip, and the father's inability to offer his son anything more than the broken toys he collects while working as a garbage man.

The biggest surprise of all the shorts was *Yellow Dog*, a highly creative film and a sort of fairy tale for grown-ups. Misaki, an artist in Tokyo, buys a new washing machine. So does Toma, a novelist in Sofia. When they start to use their new appliances, strange things begin to happen, and they discover that there is a space-warp connecting their two machines. The film incorporates sly reference to Japanese horror, while the *Yellow Dog* refers to the artist's drawings which illustrate her romantic imagination and allow her to communicate with Toma in spite of the language barrier. The drawings, by Sofia-based artist Rin

Yamamura, are works of art which could easily stand alone. As this piece of fantasy is aimed at adults, it does not come with a conventional happy ending, instead demonstrating that magic is elusive in everyday life.

I had the opportunity to talk with director Maria Nikolova in Sofia. She explained how *Yellow Dog* fits in with her past work for children's television.

AF: How did you come to make this short film?

MN: For the past seven years, I've been writing and directing educational TV series for children. *Yellow Dog* is my first movie because this is the first time that I have been able to obtain financing. Every year, Bulgarian National Television holds a competition to finance one debut, either a short or a feature-length film. I participated in a competition for short films.

AF: Were your TV programmes for children also imaginative?

MN: Yes, they were programmes about science (physics and astronomy), but written like children's fairytales. There were witches in them, and the ghost of Newton to explain the principles of physics to kids.

AF: There's no trailer for *Yellow Dog* online at the moment. When will audiences have another opportunity to see your film?

MN: There's no trailer on the internet yet. I've made a trailer for Bulgarian National Television, but the movie has not yet been shown on TV. The screening at the Sofia International Film Festival was the film's premiere. I have also submitted it to several other festivals.

AF: How did you come up with the idea for *Yellow Dog*?

MN: The original idea was a washing machine that is also a time machine. Later, we decided it should be a tunnel in space. Sotir Gelev and I wrote the script: we worked on it for about two weeks. It was fun. We had worked together before on the children's TV series.

AF: So you had a history of imaginative writing with him.

MN: Yes: Sotir is also my producer, along with his brother, Penko Gelev. They are both artists: they do design, painting, 3D animation, movies and comics. They are very imaginative, and I'm happy with them because we can work together on things that we like.

AF: Did you do any location shooting in Japan?

MN: The 'Japanese' apartment and the view of the street were shot separately. When Rin Yamamura was in Japan, she took some street shots from a café, which we inserted into our set using special effects in post-production. Rin told me that you would never find such an apartment in Japan: only cafés, shops and offices have those kinds of views.

AF: So you created an imaginary space. What about at the end of the film, when Toma walks into the warehouse full of washing machines? Were they all real, or was there also a special effect involved there?

MN: I'm glad you asked this question because they were not real: the whole room and all the machines were created through 3D animation. It's not very good, but it was the best we could do. You have to remember that the movie was made

for television: it looks different on a small screen.

AF: I noticed a reference to *The Ring* in the scene where Misaki crawls out of the washing machine. Did you have a special interest in Japan or in Asian cinema before making this film?

MN: I've never been to Japan, but I'm good friends with Rin Yamamura. I was impressed with her paintings, so I decided to create a character who is a painter. And of course, there is the Japanese horror movie, *Ringu*, where a girl with long hair comes out of a TV—we did the same thing with the washing machine, just for fun.

AF: Another director might have given this film a more playful or literal title like 'The Magic Washing Machine'. How did you decide to call it *Yellow Dog*?

MN: I didn't want to use 'washing machine' in the title. I named the film after the dog in Misaki's paintings. I thought that there was something poetic in the idea of this dog that they are riding on: it represented their dreams, the things they wanted to happen.

AF: Did you base the film on existing paintings by Rin Yamamura, or were they specially commissioned?

MN: Rin did the paintings specially. I told her exactly what I wanted her to draw, but I let her do it however she wanted because I like her style of painting very much.

AF: Toma uses a washing machine to connect with someone on the other side of the world. Most people would use the internet, but Toma is a bit of a luddite, and doesn't even have a computer—he uses a typewriter to write his novel. Did you intend to make a comment on technology?

MN: No—I needed the typewriter for my story. If Toma used a computer, the story would not work! The big question for our team was: why do Toma and Misaki not speak in English when they meet? Almost all Bulgarians know a little English, and the Japanese too. But we thought it was ok if they communicated without words.

AF: Are the actors in your film well known in Bulgaria?

MN: Stephan A. Shterev (Toma) is well known because he is a television presenter, and he has small parts in lots of Bulgarian films. Sawako Mori (Misaki) is a ballerina at the opera: she had never been in front of a camera before. I had to work with her and it all went very well. I'm glad I found her. There are not many Japanese people here, so we were very lucky. Krasimir Dokov (who plays a hobo) is popular in Bulgaria. Silvia Petkova (who plays Toma's girlfriend, Ema) is popular too: she had a leading role in a Bulgarian feature film and a Greek film.

AF: In securing actors for your film, did it help that you had worked in television?

MN: No—actors are always ready to do a movie. They are interested in short films because it's something different. They also don't have a lot of jobs here.

AF: Are you planning a feature film?

MN: Yes, my producers and I have two projects for feature films. One is a kids' fairytale, the other is an adventure movie, also for children, which will be half 3D and half live-action. We are developing the project now and looking for financing.

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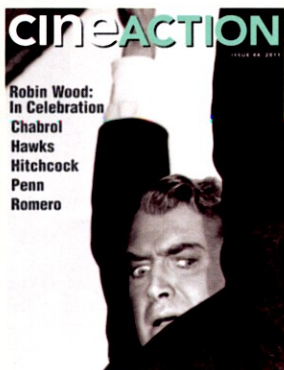
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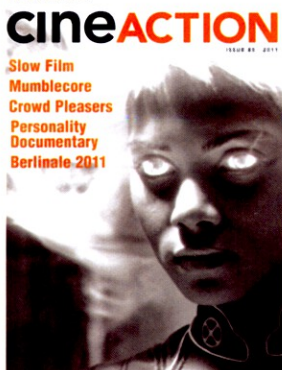
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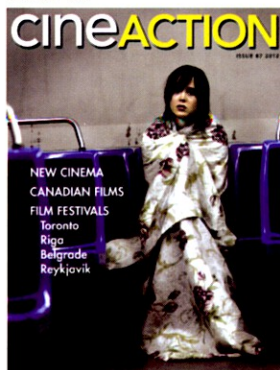
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